

# HER HEART'S DESIRE



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# HER HEART'S DESIRE

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# HER HEART'S DESIRE.

## CHAPTER I.

ONE afternoon in early June about the happiest looking girl in all England stood at the entrance of the new lions' house at the Zoological Gardens.

She stood looking wistfully and longingly, and then glanced with a little sigh of regret at a group of ladies seated under the trees on the lawn a little way off. She had been seated in the group, listening to the small talk, for nearly half an hour, and that half hour had just meant so much wasted time to her: for she loved, adored, animals of all kinds, wild or tame, and she hated gossip. So she had got up quietly and strolled off—knowing full well that to stroll away from your chaperon and guardian is an act of disobedience and wickedness of almost the last degree. With a sigh, she was going back to the group, when, unfortunately for her, the lion—the big one with the mane—gave a groan and then a roar. This was irresistible; and the girl, abandoning the proprieties, passed through the doorway, and, with ecstatic enjoyment, sauntered down the house watching the animals. There were not many people in the place, and she almost had it to herself: and no words can tell how she enjoyed it. Sometimes she leaned with both elbows on the iron bar which rails off the cages from the promenade; and now and again she climbed up the steps facing the dens and sat on one of the seats, her elbows on her knees, her chin resting in her gloved hands.

She was very happy: first, because she was young. Oh! it is good to be only twenty! Secondly, because she was perfectly healthy: and thirdly, because she had not eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. That is to

say, she was as innocent of all evil as the doves which cooed in the cages in the South Walk. Alas! how few girls of twenty are there who can lay their little white hands on their hearts and claim a like ignorance! But this child of Nature, as her aunt, Lady Pauline Lascelles, called her, had been exceptionally brought up—as will be seen presently.

She was so absorbed in the lions and tigers, the black panther with the temper, and the leopard who declined to change his spots, that when she had got to the end of the carnivora house, instead of returning to the group, she, caught by the splash of the seals, who live just outside, passed on, and instantly grew as absorbed in them. Leaning on the bar, she watched the keeper put the intelligent, soft-eyed little fellows through their stereotyped tricks, and frankly, and with an “Oh! thank you, thank you: how clever, how very clever they are!” she gave the keeper a shilling from the silver-netted purse which she extracted from the mysterious pocket which ladies favor and no man has ever yet been known to find.

From the seals she sauntered on to the monkey-house. But the evil-smelling place was too much for her, and, suddenly awakened from her kind of dream, she remembered her aunt, and retraced her steps by way of the lions’ house.

As she went through it again her pace grew slower, and she lingered just a moment or two before the big lion’s—Victor’s—cage. While she was looking at him admiringly, the keeper’s private door between the cages opened, and the keeper came out. He was followed by a gentleman, who paused a moment to look around him, then, passing something into the keeper’s hands, nodded, and walked on.

The keeper pocketed his tip, touched his hat with marked respect, and looked after the gentleman curiously.

The young girl looked after him, too, and a little enviously; for fancy being privileged to go “behind the scenes” at the Zoo!

She left the carnivora house, and walked quickly toward the lawn; then she stopped and looked round, rather aghast, for the group had gone from under the trees, and Lady Pauline was not to be seen.

She was not alarmed, because she was neither nervous nor timid; and she felt sure she could find her aunt, who was both tall and stately, and not easily hidden. So, almost as happy as before, she wandered round and about, just pausing on tiptoe, so to speak, before some particularly enticing cage, and keeping her eyes on the alert. But after half an hour spent in this way and no aunt in sight, she began to get—well, a little grave and serious.

The Zoo is not exactly a wilderness—though there are plenty of wild animals in it—and there are numerous keepers of whom one can inquire one's way; and the girl was not afraid of being lost. But she knew Lady Pauline would be anxious, and as angry as she could ever find it possible to be; and she was getting vexed with herself.

Now as she had a particularly eloquent face—eyes, lips and brow which reflected and expressed every passing emotion—it was not to be wondered at that, as she stood at the corner of one of the walks, looking from side to side anxiously, she should attract attention.

A nursemaid, dragging two children behind her, remarked to the eldest;

“Look at that pretty lidy; she's been an' lost her wiy.”

A young man glanced at her, and waited, longing to speak to her and offer assistance; but he was young and shy, and he, too, passed on. Then came the gentleman who had come from behind the dens. He was walking slowly, with eyes fixed straight before him, and he did not see the girlish figure and the anxious face until he was close upon her and he, too, looked as if he would have liked to pass by.

But something in the gray-blue eyes, in the delicate lines of the girl's white brow, stopped him against his will.

He pulled up, raised his hat, and in a grave voice that was not by any means unmusical, said:

“I beg your pardon. Are you looking for any one? Can I help you?”

The girl did not blush, but turned her eyes upon him with an almost boyish frankness.

“Oh, thank you!” she said, rather hesitatingly—for how could he help her? “I have wandered from my

people, and lost them. I have been searching for them everywhere, but cannot see them."

The girl as her eyes rested on him placidly, incuriously, saw a well-dressed man, with a handsome face, with dark eyes and hair. There was a suspicion of gray about the temples, and a look of gravity and sadness in the eyes, which, perhaps, struck her afterward. But for the moment she only noticed that he was good-looking and had a distinguished air: and that he seemed rather wearied and a little bored, but too well-bred not to try and conceal it.

No voice whispered in her ear—"Behold this man: he is your Fate—the man who will change the current of your life; the man whose slightest word, lightest smile, will have the power to move your heart to its very depths."

So she smiled at him with her eloquent mouth, with her frank, blue eyes; and the man looked gravely into the face, scarcely noticing its fascination.

"Where did you leave them?" he asked.

"Under the trees on the lawn, by the lions' cage," she replied. "I strolled in there, and wandered farther than I intended; when I came back they had gone."

"No doubt they only left for a time; they may have gone back," he said.

"Ah, do you think so?" she said, with a touch of relief in her voice, a smile in her eyes. "But I can't find it again! I've gone round and round until I feel as if I were in a maze."

"I think I know the place you mean: and, if you will allow me, I will take you back to it."

As they walked on side by side he asked:

"Is this your first visit to the Zoo?"

"Yes, my very first. We have always lived in the country. This is my first visit to London, and I begged aunt to bring me here—I had heard and read so much of it. I am so fond of animals. I have a horse of my own, two dogs, three cats, some white mice, and a guinea pig. I bought a parrot of a sailor (we live near a port), but aunt said it talked bad language, so I exchanged it for some Belgian hares."

"You must have a perfect menagerie," he remarked.

She laughed. How soon was the man to thrill from head to foot at that laugh! And yet, now, it affected him not the least bit in the world. It struck him as musical, pleasant—that was all.

"It was awfully hard to part with them. I brought the dogs and the guinea pig, and the white mice; but I had to leave the rest behind. Oh, there is the place; but my aunt is not there!" she broke off.

The man looked around, as a man does when he has undertaken to do something which he knows will be a nuisance.

"Perhaps she is searching for you, as you have been searching for her," he said. "We had better go round the gardens. What is your aunt like? But you will see her, of course, if we run against her?"

"She is tall and stately," said the girl, "and she is dressed in gray, like I am; but in silk. Oh, of course, I should see her ever so far off!"

"Then let us go round," he said; "there is no cause for anxiety."

"I am not anxious," said the girl, frankly. "Of course, aunt will be a little angry—well, not angry; she never is; she couldn't be; but I know that the carriage was ordered to take us up at one of the gates at six o'clock, and I think I could find it. Are we going through the lions' house? I hope we can. I've been through twice; but I should never get tired of it—should you?"

"Eh?" he said, absently. Her voice was musical, but he was not paying much attention to her words. "Oh, I don't know. I go to it very often."

"I saw you just now," she said, "I saw you come out from the back of the dens with the keeper."

"Did you?" he said, listlessly. "Yes, I had been round to see a young lion I brought over."

She stopped dead short, and looked at him, her limpid eyes wide as saucers, and, it must be confessed, her mouth almost as open.

"A lion you brought over! You, yourself!" she exclaimed.

He smiled a little wearily and listlessly.

"There is nothing wonderful in that," he said. "I've just come from Africa; there are lions there still, strange

to say. I caught this one after shooting its mother. It's a fine young lion, and doing very well."

"Oh, how I should like to see it!" she exclaimed, not shyly or hesitatingly, but frankly, like a girl, a child, if you like, whose wishes have always been granted.

"Should you? Nothing easier," he said, in the same tone. "The keeper shall show it to you."

He took her into the house, beckoned to the keeper, who touched his hat as respectfully as before, and, to the girl's delight, led them through the passage between the cages to the back of the dens.

"Just show us the youngster, keeper," he said.

"Yes, my lord," said the keeper obsequiously.

They had passed into a kind of covered yard, in which were standing several huge traveling cages. Some of these were covered with tarpaulin, and from one of these the keeper drew aside the covering and revealed a fine young lion. As the light streamed in upon him he blinked and snarled, showing his white, even teeth, angrily.

"Oh, what a beauty!" exclaimed the girl. "And you really caught it! Oh, how I envy you! What a lovely head it has!"

As she spoke, she went down on one knee, and, all unconscious, got a little too close to the cage.

Every one knows how quickly a cat's claw shoots out after a bird or a mouse. Like a flash of lightning the young lord of the forest darted out his paw at the girl. But the gentleman had caught the vicious look in the animal's eyes, and before the sharp claw could reach her, he had caught her by the arm and drawn her back. He was only just in time to save her, and not in time to save himself: for the sound of rent cloth mixed with the snarl and roar of disappointment which the lion sent forth.

The keeper struck at the cage, shouted rebukingly and let the tarpaulin down.

"Hope he didn't catch you, my lord?" he said, with anxious respect.

The gentleman shook his head and slipped his arm with the torn sleeve behind him.

"Not at all," he said, quietly. "Show us that young panther, keeper."

The girl looked from one to the other. She was a little pale.

"Are you sure it did not touch your arm?" she said, her sweet eyes fixed upon his face with a troubled expression; "I—I thought I heard the cloth tear. Are you sure, please?"

"Quite sure," he said, a little wearily. "There is the most dangerous animal in the gardens." He nodded toward the panther, who regarded them with a sullen ferocity, and, as he nodded, he took her arm and held her away from the cage.

The keeper showed them several other animals in the private yard, and now and again the gentleman dropped a word of criticism and advice, which, the girl noticed, the keeper received with marked deference. It seemed to her that her guardian for the time being must be a man of some importance.

But presently he appeared to remember that they were not very likely to find her people at the back of the lion's den, and, with a nod to the keeper, he led her out again. They walked round and round the most frequented parts of the Gardens for some time, stopping to look at the various cages, and the girl chatted and asked questions with a perfect freedom from shyness. Every now and then she would look up at his face laughingly, and call his attention to some odd bird or quadruped; and the man would come down out of the clouds and smile gravely.

He answered all her questions with quiet exactitude, and once or twice volunteered some information.

"You must know a great deal about animals," she remarked. "I wish I did!" and she sighed.

"I have traveled a little," he responded.

"I wish I had!" she said, with a half smile and a half sigh. "But girls don't travel, do they? They are so different from men. Now, it wouldn't matter if you were lost instead of me."

"Not much," he said.

"No; you would not be scolded and told—oh, all sorts of things. I don't see aunt anywhere—and oh, I am so thirsty!"

"Are you? Why didn't you say so before?" he asked.

"I didn't think of it before I saw the refreshment place," she replied, frankly.

He led her up the path and put a chair for her at one of the tables under the trees, full in sight of the elephants promenading with their eages of assorted human beings, and ordered tea for two.

The waiter brought it, and set it down with the usual rattle in front of the girl, and she poured it out with simple gravity, as if—well, as if they were brother and sister or man and wife.

He leaned back in his chair and regarded her with a slight increase of interest. She was certainly very beautiful. Her eyes were rather a strange blue—the blue that darkens quickly under any swift or deep emotion. Then he looked at her dress, and, seeing its simplicity, pondered over her social position. It was evident that the girl was a lady. Her very innocence and frankness proved that, even if her voice and manner had not done so.

"Do you take sugar?" she asked, lifting her eyes to his so suddenly that he found it necessary to drop his own critical ones. "No? How strange that seems! I do—as much as I can get."

"You can pour the contents of the sugar basin into your cup, if you like," he said.

"I wonder what the waiter would say! No, I am going to be content with three lumps. Oh, how nice the tea is! I was so very, very thirsty—weren't you?"

"Yes," he said, simply. He beckoned a waiter, and told him to bring some cake. The girl brightened up at it, and, after helping herself, cut a slice for him.

"Not like cake!" she said. "That's strange, too—I thought every one liked cake."

"Most young people do," he said, with the half-weary smile.

She looked at him with something like actual attention, her cake poised in her hand.

"Are you—old?" she said. The simplicity of the question, to say nothing of its frankness, brought a full-blown smile to his face, and he certainly did not look old at that moment.

"It all depends upon what you call old," he said. "I am afraid I should seem to you very aged."

"Aunt says that a man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks."

"Reckoning on that basis, I am ninety-three," he said. She smiled at him with innocent amusement.

"And I?"

He looked at her with a listless kind of scrutiny.

"Seventeen—eighteen?"

She put the cake down and stared at him with girlish indignation.

"How absurd!" I am nearly twenty."

He was surprised, and he looked it—faintly.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You are like aunt. She is always telling me that I look like a girl, and imploring me to remember that I am a woman—as if it made any difference!"

He got out a cigarette case, got it out mechanically—then glanced at her, and was putting it away again when she said :

"Are you going to smoke? Do, if you wish. I do not mind."

He lit his cigarette and leaned his elbow on the table.

"You live with your aunt?" he said—not because he wished to know, but just to make conversation. She nodded over her teacup, and munched her cake for a moment before replying.

"Yes; I have lived with her for the past ten years—she and I alone together."

"Then—your parents are dead?"

"My mother is," she said, quietly, and with a sudden sweet gravity in the lovely face. "I went to auntie when my mother died. My father is alive, and I have a brother—he is younger than I am. Aunt adopted me, you know. I had no mother nor sister, and father was traveling about, and—I suppose he was glad to get rid of me. Girls are always a nuisance, are they not?"

"I don't know—not always, I should think. Only sometimes. By the way, you did not tell me your aunt's name?"

"Lascelles—Lady Lascelles," said the girl.

He raised his eyebrows slightly, as if he recognized the name.

"And you did not tell me yours," he remarked.

" You didn't ask me," she said, simply. " It is Decima Deane. What is yours?"

She leaned forward, her chin resting on her now ungloved hand and regarded him with girlish, friendly curiosity.

The waiter came up at the moment, and the gentleman put his left hand in his pocket for his purse. He had kept his arm behind his chair during tea, and even now he moved it out of sight again quickly and shuffled his purse to the right hand; but Decima's eyes were sharp, as well as beautiful, and she saw the rent in the sleeve.

She forgot all about his name, and exclaimed:

" Why, the lion did tear your sleeve! Oh, did it scratch you?"

" No, no," he said, rather shortly. " How much, waiter?"

" Three shillings, sir."

" That is eighteen pence each," said Decima, taking out her silver chain purse, and she extracted a shilling and sixpence and laid them down on the table.

The man smiled grimly. It was evident he was the first man with whom she had ever taken tea in public.

" Put your money back," he said, much amused.

" Oh, why?" she asked, with wide eyes. " Why should you pay for me?"

" I don't know," he said; " excepting that it is usual, and that it would be exceedingly bad form for you to pay for yourself."

" Now I can't understand that!" she said, with girlish insistence, and just as if she were arguing with a school-fellow. " Why should a gentleman always pay for ladies?"

" Because it is one of the few privileges we wretched men possess."

" That's absurd!" she laughed. " Besides, we are strangers. And I don't know what aunt would say! She says that girls should always be independent; and—oh, here she is! Aunt, how did you lose me?" And she sprang up and caught the arm of the tall lady in gray, who approached with stately steps and a grave countenance.

" My dear Decima, where, where, have you been?

And"—as the gentleman rose and removed his hat—"and who is this?" she added, in an anxious undertone. Decima turned a smiling and grateful face toward her late and temporary guardian.

"Oh, this gentleman has been helping me to find you, and we could not, though we went everywhere."

Lady Lascelles glanced at the tea-table, and then at the tall and erect gentleman in front of it, with a gray and stern eye.

"And I was so thirsty," Decima went on, answering the look, "and he got some tea; and—well, then you came up! I am so glad! But I should not have been lost, should I? I should have gone to the gate where the carriage was to wait. And, oh, aunt, will you please thank this gentleman for taking so much trouble—"

Lady Lascelles touched the girl's arm, as an exhortation to silence, and addressed the gentleman.

"I am greatly obliged to you for your care of my niece, sir. I am afraid she has given you some trouble. To whom am I indebted?"

The gentleman frowned slightly, as if the question were an unwelcome one. From his cigarette case lying on the table he took a card and gave it to her.

"That is my name," he said, quietly.

Lady Lascelles started slightly, her face flushing.

He bowed as if he understood, his lips set tight.

The stately lady became taller and more stately. With a cold "good-day" she drew Decima's hand over her arm—as if the girl suddenly needed protection—and was walking her off. But Decima looked back, with a troubled expression in her eyes and about the expressive mouth, and, swiftly releasing her arm, she ran back to where the gentleman was still standing, a faint, grim smile of amusement in his eyes.

"Oh, I haven't thanked you as I ought to!" she said. "You were so kind and—and patient! And you showed me the private lions, you know—and I am so grateful!—and—oh, please do not be offended with aunt, but—but shake hands."

She held out her hand and he took it. He did not press it, but let it fall, and with another lifting of his hat walked away.

Lady Lascelles waited, with her lips tightly set, a frown upon her broad brow.

"Decima, come, please!" she said.

Decima turned to her aunt's side, but looked rather wistfully after the tall, retreating form of the man who had been so coldly treated for his kindness.

"Why—why were you so angry with him, aunt?" she asked, just a little piteously. "He was very, very kind, and—and—what has he done to make you so cross?"

"My dear Decima, you must not ask questions which I cannot answer. It was very wrong of you to permit a gentleman—a stranger—to walk about the gardens with you. And how could you possibly sit there and take tea with him?"

"I was thirsty!" said Decima, simply.

Lady Lascelles almost groaned.

"Decima, you are nothing better than a child, a mere child! You must never do such a thing again!"

"Why not? What harm have I done?" insisted the girl.

"It is—it is not usual; it is bad etiquette, manners, form, to walk about with a strange man—to take tea with him is worse. Any strange gentleman is bad enough. But that man of all men in the wide world!"

"Why was it worse to walk about and sit down to tea with him than any one else, aunt?" Decima asked.

Lady Lascelles bit her lip.

"Because—my dear girl, you would not understand—"

"But, aunt, why?"

"Because he is a bad, wicked man: one of the most wicked men in the world."

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## CHAPTER II.

"One of the most wicked men in the world" meanwhile walked slowly across the Gardens to the Clarence Gate, and, calling a cab, told the man to drive him to Cavendish Square. Stopping the cab at the house of Sir James Starke, he inquired if the great physician were in, and was shown into the consulting room.

Sir James Starke had just come in from his rounds, and still had his hat on; he tilted it up with an expression of astonishment at sight of his visitor.

"Hallo, Gaunt!" he said. "I didn't know you were in England! How are you? Sit down. Anything the matter?" As he shook hands he surveyed the weary, handsome face with the physician's penetrating gaze.

Lord Gaunt took off his coat and rolled up the sleeve of his left arm.

"Just cauterize that, will you, Starke?" he said, quietly.

Sir James turned the arm to the light—an arm well made and muscular, hard as iron and smooth as marble.

"Why—what is it?" he said. "A dog bite?" No! Cat scratch? What is it?"

"A lion scratch," said Lord Gaunt. "Got it at the Zoo, fooling with the cub I brought over. It isn't much, but it felt angry, and—well, I've seen a nigger or two go mad with blood poisoning for less than this."

Sir James nodded gravely, and got the caustic.

"It's not like you to come to harm in this way, Gaunt," he said. "You must have been very careless."

"Yes, I was," said Lord Gaunt, concisely.

After he had performed the simple operation, Sir James looked at his patient's face and ran a finger on his pulse. Then he shook his head.

"Same old game, Gaunt!" he said gravely.

Lord Gaunt smiled grimly.

"Same old game," he said, quietly.

"Pity! pity!" murmured Sir James. "Can't you do something better with your life than waste it?"

"I don't know; I've never asked myself the question. Perhaps I don't waste my life more than you waste yours. It's all a point of view, you know, Starke."

"My dear fellow!" expostulated Starke, the great physician. "I work, earn money—"

"And I lounge and laze and spend it. Who shall say which is the wisest? Life is just a chance for making mistakes—"

Sir James nodded sympathetically.

"I know! But—but—some mistakes are lived down—forgotten."

"Not my kind," said Lord Gaunt. "Done with this arm? Right. Thanks."

He rolled down his sleeve and put on his coat.

"Where have you come from now?" asked Sir James, regarding him with an admiring and yet pitying eye. For the face and form were handsome and even grand; but the expression of the eye and the mouth was that which makes women, when they see it, sigh and grow sad—though they know not why.

"Africa. Think I'm going back. I should have gone before this, but my man, the steward at Leafmore, has been worrying me; says that the place is going to pieces, and that he wants me to go down there. Let it go to pieces! Who cares? Certainly not I!"

"Why not go down there and try and settle down for a time?" said Sir James. "Look here, Gaunt; you know the old story of the machine that would go too fast?"

"I dare say. Stopped all at once, didn't it? And you think I shall stop, like the machine. Well, why not? What does it matter?" He laughed a grim, short laugh. "You doctors think life's the most important of all things; that's where you make the mistake. No use offering you a fee I suppose?"

The famous physician, Sir James Starke, and the famous traveler, Lord Gaunt, had been at college together—though Sir James was much the elder.

Sir James laughed and shook his head.

"Go down to Leafmore for awhile, Gaunt."

"I'll see," said his lordship.

He took up his hat and held it in his hand. Then he said, listlessly:

"Do you happen to know a Lady Lascelles?"

"Lady Pauline Lascelles, do you mean?"

"I dare say."

"Oh, yes! She is a patient of mine. Why do you ask?"

"Oh! for no particular reason. I just met her. Met a niece of hers—a Miss—Miss—singular name; I've forgotten it."

"You mean Decima Deane!" said Sir James, his keen face lighting up. "Oh, yes! the loveliest, dearest girl in the world!"

He laughed and chuckled as at some private joke.

"What the devil are you laughing at?" inquired Gaunt, with languid surprise.

"Oh! at the girl," said Sir James. "You know, or, rather, you don't know, that she has been brought up by Lady Lascelles on a system of her own—I mean her ladyship's own. Innocence, absolute innocence and purity, combined with a knowledge of everything, but—er—but the things most girls know at two-thirds Decima's age."

"Ah! does it answer?" asked Lord Gaunt, looking into his hat.

"Well—yes. That is to say, the system has produced the sweetest and most fascinating mixture of frankness and innocence; the audacity of a child and the sweetness of a girl. But how will it answer presently when—when the girl suddenly discovers that she is a woman, we shall see. Have you seen much of her?"

"About one hour and a quarter," said Lord Gaunt, wearily. "And, judging from Lady Lascelles' manner, I am not likely ever to make up the other three quarters."

"And weren't you struck with her?"

"The aunt?"

"Dash it all, no! The girl—Decima!"

"Don't know. 'Pon my word, I scarcely noticed her."

He yawned and took out his cigarette case.

"Good-by, Starke. I'll think over your advice."

"And won't take."

"I daresay not. Good-by."

He left the house and walked across the park to his flat in Prince's Mansions. Men and woman—especially the latter—glanced at the handsome, listless face curiously, and now and again the passers-by said something like this to each other:

"That's the famous Lord Gaunt. Great traveler, and—er—you know."

But the famous Lord Gaunt strode on, taking no heed, his eyes fixed before him.

His flat was on the first floor, and as he entered the vestibule, carpeted with lion and leopard skins, and lined with trophies of the chase, he smelled the scent of a cigarette coming from the library.

He pushed the thick oak door open, and, standing on

the threshold, looked at a man lying full length on the saddlebag couch.

The man rose with a smile and a "Hallo, Gaunt!" And Lord Gaunt stood stock still, with a face set and white, and said nothing.

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### CHAPTER III.

THE two men stood and looked at each other ; Lord Gaunt white and stern ; the visitor with a pleasant but half-mocking smile. He was a fair man—one of those delicately fair men whose age it is so difficult to tell—with a good-looking, almost handsome face, with bright, blue eyes, and shapely lips which were not concealed by a mustache, but seemed together with the eyes to say : " Believe me, my owner is the personification of innocence and guilelessness ; he has nothing to conceal, no bad conscience to worry, no remorse to torture him, and so he faces the world with a bland and child-like smile and wishes all men well."

This is what the face had been trained to say, and it said it with almost invariable success ; only on very rare occasions did the mask slip and the real nature behind it reveal itself ; for, with all his smiling lips and his blue eyes, Morgan Thorpe was as unscrupulous a villain, as false a man, as ever trod this villain-ridden earth.

He was dressed in a suit of light tweed which fitted his graceful figure to perfection, and as he raised his hand—white and well-formed as a woman's—and lightly pushed back his heavy hair, which had been ruffled by the silken sofa cushion, a splendid ring shone on the taper finger.

The two men formed a marked contrast. Lord Gaunt, with his classical face, tragic and almost awe-inspiring in its whiteness and sternness, with his dark eyes lit as by a smouldering fire ; the other man, fair and debonnaire, with the smile of an audacious child—or a heartless woman laughing as she wounds.

It was Morgan Thorpe who spoke first.

" How do you do ? " he said, in a voice low, soft and musical.

Lord Gaunt's eyes remained fixed on the pleasant, boyish face.

"You have found me," he said, with that kind of calm which comes to the brave man in supreme moments.

Morgan Thorpe laughed.

"My dear fellow! How curt! How brusque! Is this the way in which to receive an old friend who has been searching for you for—how many weary months—years?"

Lord Gaunt placed his hat on the table, and, going to the fern-filled fireplace, leaned his elbow on the mantel and regarded his visitor steadily.

"How did you find me?" he asked, as a man asks of the physician how he had discovered the fatal disease.

The other man dropped back on the couch, stretched out his hand to the cigarette box of sandalwood which stood on the table within reach, took a cigarette and smiled up at Gaunt's stern, set face.

"My dear Barnard—I beg your pardon, I should say, my dear Lord Gaunt!—why do you glare at me so reproachfully and like a Banquo's ghost?" he said, with the soft voice pitched in a tone of banter which made Gaunt's teeth close tightly and caused his hands to clinch at his side. "It is I who ought to look black and overwhelm you with reproaches! Just think of it! Two years ago"

Gaunt's face worked, but his voice was stern and cold as he broke in:

"There is no need to go back to the past——"

"Pardon me; but I really think there is!" retorted Morgan Thorpe, stretching himself luxuriously like a cat on a soft hearth-rug. "Your manner is so—what shall I say?—inhospitable, not to say repellent—that I feel it to be necessary to state the case—shall we say the plaintiff?"

Gaunt did not move a limb, or the eyes which rested upon the face upturned to him.

"What is the case?" continued Morgan Thorpe, delicately knocking the ash from his cigarette on to the inlaid table. "Three years ago"—he half closed his eyes and regarded the white-faced man before him through the narrow slits as a cat regards a wretched mouse lying between her paws—"you and I, and another, who shall

be nameless, were the closest friends. We had met as fellow travelers in an Alpine pass—Alpine pass sounds quite ‘novelish,’ doesn’t it? I like the sound: Alpine pass! We spent the night with sundry guides and porters in a snowbound hut. The acquaintance thus pleasantly commenced ripened into a friendship which I trust may continue—”

Gaunt made a gesture of impatience; but Morgan Thorpe only smiled, as the cat might smile at the contortions of the mouse.

“ You are traveling alone and are solitary. I have my sister with me—a charming girl, whom to see and to know is to—love.”

Gaunt bit his lip and drew a long breath.

“ You see, you learn to know, you love her! For reasons best known to yourself you travel incog. You state that your name is Edward Barnard, a gentleman of independent means traveling for pleasure and instruction. As Edward Barnard you lay siege to my sister’s heart, and you take by storm that precious citadel.”

Gaunt shifted one foot, but his eyes never left the smiling, mocking face. As the tortured man on the rack watches the executioner, so he watched Morgan Thorpe.

“ The lady is, of course, virtuous. There is only one road to happiness—the path which leads to matrimony—and, as Edward Barnard, you take it. You and the beauteous Laura are married at the little English church at Vevey, on—what is the date?”

Lord Gaunt remained stonily silent. He was like the figure of the Sphinx in his set calmness.

“ No matter; I have the date on the certificate in my pocketbook. You are married, with all the forms and ceremonies prescribed by rigid Law and exacting Church, and you set out for your honeymoon! Alas, it is a short honeymoon. Before it has scarce begun to wane you—”

Gaunt’s self-restraint seemed to fail him at this point, and he broke in, with scarcely repressed passion:

“ I discovered that the woman I had married was an adventuress—a woman who—”

“ Pardon!” said Morgan Thorpe, softly, sweetly. “ Remember I am the brother and spare me! Do not let us indulge in recriminations; it is childish, useless. Let

us say that you discovered that there was such an incompatibility of temper that you found it impossible to live with her. Shall we put it that way?"

Lord Gaunt made no response, and the swift and musical voice went on.

"One day you left your wife, your bride—my dear fellow, how could you be so heartless?—with the intimation that you did not intend to return. She was heart-broken, desolate! Not even the addendum to your letter which informed her that a liberal allowance would be paid to her while she refrained from molesting you consoled her. Alas! she loved you."

Lord Gaunt moved slightly, and a grim smile played on his lips for a moment, to be followed by the set sternness which had dominated his expression hitherto.

"She loved you. She charged me with the task of following and finding you. I, as her devoted brother, accepted that task. My dear Barnard, these Turkish cigarettes of yours are dry—very dry!"

Lord Gaunt went to the sideboard and got out a spirit ease and a siphon, and placed them on the table.

"Will you not join me?" asked Thorpe. "No? Well, I am doing all the talking—and talking is thirsty work."

He sipped the beverage with slow, exasperating slowness, and Gaunt watched him with a fierce, burning impatience. The man's presence, his voice, were an absolute torture.

"I commenced my search," said Morgan Thorpe. "I try, first, the South of France. It is the winter—you will remember—but nowhere do I find a handsome man by the name of Barnard—you are devilish good-looking, you know, Barnard—a hundred pardons—Lord Gaunt—and then I come to London. As well look for a needle in a bundle of hay as look for a man in this place. I like London; I love it, excepting when I am on the hunt for a man. Then it is a beastly maze. At last one day—to be particular, we must speak by the card, as Hamlet says—what a lot of Hamlets I have seen!—I happen actually to see you—you yourself, going into this very house!"

He laughed softly and blew the smoke from his cigarette in a series of rings and watched them with lazy interest and amusement as they floated to the ceiling.

"I rang the bell and knocked as directed, and inquired for 'Mr. Barnard.' No one knew the name. Then I watched again, and inquired again, and described you. And I found that instead of a plain, common 'Mr. Barnard,' my sister, my dearly-beloved sister, for whom I would lay down my life, had married no less a personage than my Lord Gaunt."

Gaunt took up a cigar from the mantel and lit it, but after a moment he flung it among the ferns in the grate, and resumed his old attitude.

Morgan Thorpe turned on his side into a more comfortable position.

"Yes; I found that my dear sister had married no less a personage than Lord Gaunt—Baron of the United Kingdom, Earl Gaunt of Ireland, Viscount Bascardine of Scotland, Lord-Lieutenant of Downshire."

Gaunt moved his hand spasmodically; but the soft, musical voice went on with the even flow of the river.

"With residences in Devonshire and Scotland, a house in Park Lane, and an Italian palace on the banks of the Arno."

Gaunt turned from the fern-filled fireplace and strode across the room, then came back to his old place and attitude, and Morgan Thorpe still watched him as the cat watches the mouse when it ventures a despairing run.

"This was the man who had married my sister and heartlessly abandoned her! Lord Gaunt, baron, Scotch earl, lord-lieutenant; in a word, a nobleman of the highest rank, and worth—shall we say a million of money?"

Gaunt took up a cigar again and lit it with the stoicism of desperation.

"Well?" he said, grimly. "Having made your discovery, what do you propose to do?"

Morgan Thorpe leaned back and closed his eyes.

"An eminently practical question!" he inurmured.

"It is the question I have been asking myself ever since I have been here, my dear Barnard—pardon!—Lord Gaunt. Two courses are open to me, as a famous statesman might say. I might go to my sister, the mourning bride so to speak, and acquaint her with my discovery. Whereupon she would of course hasten to England and claim her husband. Ah, my dear Barnard—pardon!"

Gaunt—you have no conception of the extent of the love our dear Laura bears for you! She would claim her husband and insist upon taking her place in the world of rank, and fashion, which, as you know, she would adorn so conspicuously." He smiled up at the white, strained face mockingly. "And I have a very strong conviction that she would make things hum, as our Yankee cousins say."

He closed his eyes and smiled, as if at some mental picture.

"The other course, as the famous statesman would say, which presented itself to me was one of caution and—er—reserve. Nothing is more disagreeable than to live with a person who is completely uncongenial, and I felt that I should be doing you a signal service if I were to conceal your identity and whereabouts from our dear Laura. In other words, my friend, I felt that I should be proving the warm affection I cherish for you if I were to say nothing about my discovery."

Gaunt raised his head.

"You would betray her trust in you?" he said.

Morgan Thorpe smiled and shrugged his shoulders—shrugged them so hard that he displaced the cushions and had to rearrange them before replying.

"As to that—what is confidence and what is betraying it? Ethical questions both, my dear Gaunt—"

Gaunt strode across the room again.

"Where is she?" he asked hoarsely.

"At Vevey," replied Morgan Thorpe. "A most charming place—but dull, devilish dull. She is there amusing herself as best she can, and awaiting the result of my search. I have only to wire 'found him; come to London; the Metropole,' and she will be here in less than thirty-six hours."

Gaunt sank into a chair, then stood up again, as if reluctant to show any sign of weariness. "On the other hand," continued Morgan Thorpe, "I have only to write, 'Cannot find him; believe he has left the country,' and she will remain at that God-forsaken hole, or go to Paris."

Gaunt looked at him steadily.

"If she came, she would not find me here," he said. "I shall start for Africa in a few hours' time."

Morgan Thorpe shrugged his shoulders and laughed softly.

"My dear Lord Gaunt, she would not care whether she found you or not—whether you were here, or baking on Africa's burning sands. She would be quite happy setting up her claim to be my Lady Gaunt, Baroness of Gaunt, Countess of Gaunt, of Ireland, Viscountess Bas-cardine of Scotland! That would be quite enough amusement for her."

Gaunt went to a bookcase, and stared at a row of books without seeing them. Then he came back to the fireplace.

"You mean to blackmail me," he said, with an awful calmness. "How much do you want? Say as quickly and shortly as you can—for my temper is rough and I can scarcely hold myself in hand."

"My dear Barnard!" jeered the other.

Lord Gaunt sprang across the room and seized him by the throat, and the soft mocking laughter ceased with grotesque suddenness.

"How much, you devil?" he said, between his teeth. "You and she have me in your power—I know it. Name your price!"

Then, ashamed of himself, he flung the man from him and strode away, his own face working, his lips livid, as if it had been himself who had been half choked.

Morgan Thorpe, struggling for breath, felt his throat tenderly.

"What—what a savage you are!" he said, huskily. "No wonder my poor sister——"

"Say no more!" broke in Gaunt, with an ominous gesture. "Nothing will induce me to acknowledge your sister as my wife, and you know it. Name your price—the price of your silence——"

Morgan Thorpe stood up, and with rather a shaky hand took a fresh drink.

"You mean my price for concealing your identity?" he said.

"For holding your tongue—yes?" he said.

"Well," drawled Thorpe, "suppose we say a couple of thousand pounds?"

Gaunt looked at him with loathing eyes for a moment; then he went to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and

took out a check book. He filled in the check, laid it on the table, and pointed to it.

"That is for a thousand pounds," he said. "I will pay you that every year, so long as I am unmolested by——"

"Your wife, Lady Gaunt," said Morgan Thorpe. "I agree! Leave the matter to me, my dear Barnard—tush! how the old name clings! I'll undertake to keep her quiet. Now, shall we dine together?"

Gaunt opened the door.

"For God's sake, go!" he said, very quietly—with the quietude of a man goaded almost beyond the point of endurance. "Go before I do you any harm!"

Morgan Thorpe looked at the white face, with its veins standing out; at the stalwart, muscular figure, with the strength of a Hercules, and laughed.

"My dear fellow, I only wanted to be friendly! But if you will not— Well, so long!"

He put his hat on with careful precision, adjusted his necktie in the Venetian mirror beside the door, and then held out his hand.

Gaunt looked at the hand; then raised his smouldering eyes to the mocking blue ones, and something in the lambent fire of the eyes of the man he had been torturing, prompted Morgan Thorpe to make his exit without an attempt at another turn of the rack.

"So long, dear boy!" he murmured, and passed out.

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## CHAPTER IV.

If you do not want a girl to get interested in a man, never tell her that he is wicked. To an innocent young girl wickedness is a mystery, and all mysteries are fascinating.

Decima was very quiet as the carriage, with its fat slugs of horses, bowled smoothly home to Lady Pauline Lascelles' house in Berkeley Square. As a rule, she looked out of the window with eager eyes and asked endless questions; but this evening the gray-blue orbs were dreamy, and there was a little line of disappointment about the mobile lips.

That very evening at dinner Decima learned from her aunt that her father had sent for her—that he needed her at home. This information shocked her, it was so sudden. Her heart ached at the thought of leaving the woman who for the past ten years had been a mother to her. Lady Pauline informed her that her father, who had long been a visionary and a dreamer, was at last sanguine that one of his many inventions was likely to prove a great success.

It was a tearful parting that occurred the next day between the aunt and niece. Late in the afternoon the train drew up at Shelton Wold, and Decima's brother met her at the station. Both had grown so during the last ten years that each was astonished at the change in the other.

A fly was at hand, and as this rolled off from the station, Bobby Deane, the seventeen-year-old brother, told his sister of the many strange things concerning her father's household.

"We are pestered to death with ignorant and careless servants," he said, "and we change them about every other week. We have cooks who would not recognize a potato if they met it in the street; waiting maids who kindly permit us to do all the waiting while they talk with their young men at the back kitchen door. We have just got rid of one young lady who looked upon the wine cup too often, and was found by the unfortunate individual who addresses you, lying under the kitchen dresser one-quarter of an hour before dinner time. We have at present what I believe is called 'a demon breaker; ' she has a pleasant but slightly inconvenient habit of collecting all the glass and china on a tray and slipping up on it. We have no tumblers left, and only a coffee cup and a mug. She is under notice, and I left her in tears, wailing that she had no mother. If she had, she'd tumble over her, and break her."

Decima looked half aghast through her laughter.

"My dear Bobby! My poor Bobby! And poor father!"

"He doesn't mind, doesn't care. He is up in the clouds all the time. Dreaming, inventing things to make his fortune. He doesn't eat—he only stokes. I'm not sure that he sleeps. At any rate, he's perfectly indifferent to

anything and everything ; and the house can go to smithereens so that one room—his laboratory and study—is left standing. See ? ”

“ Poor Bobby ! And all the time I have been living a life of luxury and ease——”

“ Oh, that’s all right ! ” said Bobby, quickly and generously. “ You can’t help having a father utterly unlike any other male parent in the world ! no more can I. And I’m jolly glad you’ve been out of it all this time. In fact, I was dead against the guv’nor sending for you ; but—well, he makes up his mind now and again and when he does he makes it up into such a jolly stiff parcel that there is no undoing it.”

“ I am glad, glad he sent for me,” said Decie. “ But, Bobby, I—I am afraid I don’t know much about house-keeping.”

“ You couldn’t possibly know less or make more of a muddle of the show than we are doing,” said Bobbie, encouragingly. “ But, upon my word, I’m sorry for you, Decie ! I’m afraid you won’t like the change from—how did you put it ? —a life of luxury and ease with Lady Pauline, to slave-driving at Woodbines.”

“ Oh, what a pretty place, Bobby ! ” exclaimed Decima, as the fly pulled up at a tall iron gate opening on to an old-fashioned garden in front of a red-bricked, ivy-covered house.

“ Glad you like it. Behold the Woodbines—the residence of Peter Deane, Esq., and your home, my dear sister.”

Decima jumped out of the fly and went up the path. The door of the house was open, and even as she entered the square, old-fashioned hall, the sound of a falling plate and the crash of the breaking thereof were heard.

“ Sarah Jane’s welcome to her young mistress ! ” said Bobby, gravely.

Decima smiled and looked round a little nervously.

“ Where is my father ? ” she asked, and she moved toward the door of the drawing-room.

“ Oh, I’ll take you to him. There’s only one place in which he can possibly be. Follow me, and mind the step, and the pail which is almost sure to be on it, and over which I break my shin with painful frequency.”

He pushed open a baize door, went down a narrow passage—just here Decima heard the parlor-maid explaining to the cook how she had dropped the plate. “It slipped out o’ my ’and as if it was a piecee o’ ot butter, it did, I do assure you, cook!”—and knocked at a thick oak door, through which, though it was tightly closed, came sundry and various odors, all of them wondrously strange and extraordinarily powerful.

A voice which seemed to come from a distance, said, impatiently, “Come in!” and Decima and Bobby entered.

It was a large room, lined with numerous shelves, on which stood, in a gorgeous litter, books, retorts, instruments, plaster casts, models of every description. A small furnace was blazing away in one corner, a forge and lathe were conspicuous in the center of the room. There were, also, a carpenter’s bench, and a modeling table, an electro-plating battery—and, in short, a collection of tools, models, instruments and general lumber, which would have fitted out a country museum or a workshop in Bedlam.

Working at the bench stood a man in his shirt-sleeves; his hair, long and gray, half falling over his huge forehead; he was dressed in a shabby old suit of a fashion ten years back, wore no collar and stood in a pair of thick carpet slippers at least two sizes too large for him.

Decima stared at him, pale and a little tremulous. She scarcely remembered him!

“Here’s Decima, father!” said Bobby.

Mr. Deane looked up, pushed the hair from his forehead and blinked at the beautiful vision.

“Decima?” he said. “Decima? Where is she? Has this lady brought her?”

“This lady”—began Bobby; but Decima, with a little cry and a gush of tears to her eyes, which made her way rather uncertain, ran to the strange object and put her arm round his neck.

“Father, I am Decima. Don’t you know me?”

“God bless my soul! Is it really?” he said, with a dreamy amazement. “How—how you’ve grown!” He looked at her abstractedly for a moment, then he sighed. “You’re like your mother”—he said—“it might be she.

Decima leaned against the bench and held his hand.

"I am glad I am like my mother," she said. "I am glad to come home, father."

"Oh, take care, take care!" he said, with sudden anxiety. "You're leaning against my model—the model! I'm afraid it will break—er—er—thank you!" He took the model from behind her and drew a breath of relief. "Not broken! Thank God!" he murmured. "And so you're—Decima—"

But his eyes were fixed on the model as he carried it to a place of safety, and not on her.

And this was Decima's homecoming. And these two, the half-crazy man and the boy, were all she had to protect her from "the dragons by the way!"

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## CHAPTER V.

THE first dinner of which Decima partook at the Woodbines convinced her that Bobby's statements regarding the servants had not been exaggerated. It was wretchedly cooked, and served in a slovenly way. At its close Bobby proposed a stroll in the moonlight. A short walk brought them in sight of a gloomy mansion of white stone, faced with white pillars and sentinelled on three sides by a number of fir trees. She learned from her brother that this was the habitation of Mr. Theodore Mershon, a keen, dark-eyed little man, who was considered something of a parvenu.

As brother and sister strolled near the entrance to "The Firs," as the place was designated, the owner, a smooth-faced young man, was standing just inside the gate, smoking a cigar. He took off his hat rather superciliously to Bobby, but, seeing a rather handsome lady with him, his manner at once became quite affable. Bobby introduced him to his sister, and Mr. Mershon strove to ingratiate himself into the favor of the young lady. He spoke of the natural charms of Shelton, of the many delightful spots in the vicinity, and begged the privilege of having Bobby and his father to dinner some night. "Of course the invitation includes Miss Deane," he concluded, with a glance of admiration at Decima.

Bobby thought this was rather an informal and abrupt

invitation, and he replied to it by stating that he was not just then prepared to announce his acceptance of it. As brother and sister passed on, Mershon watched them with fascinated interest.

"What a lovely creature!" he exclaimed. "Fancy that old maniac having a daughter like that!"

Brother and sister strolled on, unconscious of the man's admiration, and presently turned down a narrow lane. Suddenly they came upon the entrance to an avenue guarded by a pair of old iron gates. An ivy-covered lodge of red brick stood just inside the gate, and it was so venerable and romantic in appearance that it evoked an exclamation of admiration from Decima.

A small wooden gate at some distance from the lodge afforded an entrance through the stone wall that guarded the grounds at this point, and through this Bobby led his sister. They passed along a winding avenue, and a turn of the road presently brought to view the grand and spacious old mansion known as Leafmore. "What a magnificent place!" exclaimed Decima. "But the windows are all dark. Who lives there?"

"No one. This estate belongs to a man named Gaunt—Lord Gaunt. He is enormously rich, it is said, but he has not been here for years. Gossip proclaims that he doesn't bear the best of reputations."

"Do you mean that he is a bad man?"

"That is the popular impression. Although I have never seen Lord Gaunt, I am well acquainted with his steward, Mr. Bright; and he says that his master, while he has some faults, is a fine fellow. In fact, Bright assured me that Lord Gaunt's conduct was all that it should be until something suddenly happened to change him. What it was he doesn't know. Something with a woman in it, I suppose."

"A woman!" said Decima, musingly.

"Yes, that is the excuse generally given. But it's no business of ours. Yet it is a pity that such a pretty place should be permitted to go to ruin. I come here frequently to fish 'in the little stream you see yonder, glistening in the moonlight."

On the following afternoon at about five o'clock Bobby and Decima once more visited Leafmore, the brother with

the intention of engaging in his favorite pursuit of fishing and the sister to enjoy the opportunity of inspecting the attractions of the place by daylight.

While Bobby prepared his flies, close to the lodge, Decima wandered down the avenue, picking the wild flowers which grew along the border. Bobby was about to start toward the river when he was suddenly aroused by a clinking sound. He looked up and saw a gentleman shaking the big entrance gates.

Boylike, he watched him for a moment or two with bland enjoyment; then he shouted, "Hi!"

The gentleman looked around, saw the recumbent figure, and said, "Well?"

"Gate's locked," remarked Bobby, in his concise fashion. "There's a door here"—he indicated the lower gate, "if you want to come in."

"Thanks," said the gentleman, and he came along to the wall, passed through the other gate, and stood beside the lad, looking down at him.

"That big gate's always kept locked," said Bobby.

"Indeed?" said the gentleman. "I am a stranger here; I didn't know."

Bobby looked at him casually.

"Are you going to see the house?" he said. "It's worth seeing—the carving and pictures especially."

"Are they?" responded the gentleman. "Do you live here?"

"Oh, no—that is, not at the house. I live in the village, but I know it very well."

After bidding the gentleman good-day Bobby strode off rod in hand, in the direction of the river. As he passed on he shouted to his sister.

"All right!" she called back, "I will follow you. Here are the loveliest cowslips! I must get a bunch."

"Very well; follow the track," he shouted back, and went on his way, whistling.

The gentleman looked after him, then sat down on the bank, took out his cigar case, and lit a cigar.

The match was still in his hand when Decima came, with light, fleet steps, down the avenue.

She was arranging her flowers as she came, and did not see him until she was close upon him. Then she

paused a moment, and glanced at him, with a faint surprise, and was passing on again, when he rose and raised his hat.

She stopped short, with a slight cry of recognition and astonishment on her lips; for she saw that it was the gentleman who had befriended her at the Zoo.

He had recognized her at the first moment, and his eyes rested on her face inquiringly, as if he were half curious to see what she would do.

He had not long to wait. With a touch of color in her cheeks, and a shy, embarrassed expression in her eyes, Decima looked at him, then looked beyond him, over his head, and passed on without a sign of recognition.

Gaunt smiled grimly, and stood like a soldier, erect and unbending, his eyes fixed on her, as if the cut direct amused rather than wounded him.

As she passed on, her lovely face set and cold, she continued the arrangement of her flowers, and—perhaps her hand trembled, for it was trying business, this cutting of a man who had been kind to her—she let a large number of them slip from her fingers.

She stopped, and, biting her lip softly, began to pick them up, and Gaunt stepped forward and assisted her.

As he handed the yellow blossoms to her, he said, very quietly :

“Have you forgotten me?”

The blood rushed to Decima’s face.

“No,” she said.

“Not forgotten me? And yet you would not bow to me? Why was that?”

Decima looked from side to side.

“I—I cannot tell you,” she said.

“But—forgive me!—don’t you think you owe me some explanation? Let me put the case the other way. If you had deigned to bow to me, and I had declined to respond, if I had cut you, would you not think an explanation due from me?”

“Yes,” said Decima, her brows coming straight, her lovely eyes growing dark-blue.

“Be just, then. Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you!” he said. There was a suspi-

cion of banter in his tone, and, at the same time, a grim kind of appeal which touched Decima.

"Must I tell you?" she said, in a troubled voice.

"Yes; I think you ought."

"Then—oh, I wish you would not ask me! My aunt does not wish me to—know you!"

"Why?" he asked, very quietly. "I admit that is a sufficient reason for the cut; but I am curious to know her reason."

"Because—because you are—oh, I cannot tell you!" she broke off, scarlet to the very neck.

"Too bad for you to know?" he said, with a smile.

Decima hung her head.

"Thank you," he said, "I am answered. Good-by."

She turned and went a few steps from him, then she swung round and came back, her innocent soul shining through her eyes.

"Why are you so wicked?" she said, painfully, as if the question were forced from her. "You were so kind to me."

His face grew hard and set, then he smiled grimly.

"That would take a lot of answering," he said. "Wait a moment until I decide whether I can tell you."

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## CHAPTER VI.

"WAIT until I decide whether I can tell you," said Gaunt.

And Decima waited, her innocent gray eyes on his face, with a kind of troubled patience. He looked beyond her fixedly with a grave thoughtfulness, and was silent so long that Decima almost thought that he had forgotten her; then he looked at her with a grim smile.

"I have decided that I cannot tell you, Miss—" he hesitated.

"Deane!" said Decima. "Decima Deane. You have forgotten my name."

"I had," he said. "It was unpardonable; but you see, when a man has need of so much forgiveness, a small shortcoming or two, more or less, scarcely counts. "No; I can't answer your question, Miss Deane; but, all the

same, I should like to make a short statement in my own defense."

He then spoke of the way of the world in condemning trivial faults as great sins; that it condemned, for instance, social card playing as gambling; friendly intercourse between people of opposite sexes as criminal intimacy; and he closed with the charitable statement that perhaps Lady Pauline had formed her harsh judgment of him on insufficient evidence.

His apparent candor won her esteem, and she began to harbor the belief that her aunt had really misjudged this sad-faced man—that he was not as black as he had been painted.

Soon the conversation drifted to the neglected condition of Leafmore and its eccentric master. Decima bluntly and emphatically censured the "heartless owner" of such fine property for his indifference as to its welfare, serenely unconscious that the man she censured was walking beside her.

They had been strolling toward the river, and as they approached the bank Gaunt saw that Bobby was eagerly trying to catch a playful but extremely cautious trout. After he had made three or four unsuccessful attempts Gaunt begged permission to try his skill.

To the amazement of Bobby, his first throw showed him to be a skilful angler. In about two minutes the fish was hooked.

"Oh, what a splendid fellow!" Decima exclaimed, as Gaunt brought him to the bank and Bobby slipped the net under him.

"Thank you," said Gaunt, handing the rod back to Bobby.

Bobby laughed.

"You throw a beautiful fly, sir," he said. "Are you staying here? If so, I'll ask Bright—the steward—to give you permission to—Hallo, here he is!" he broke off, as a short, thick-set man, with a pleasant, good-humored face, came round the hill.

"Hi, Bright! how are you? Just look at this fish! This is my sister. Decima, this is Mr. Bright. This gentleman caught him—Why, what's the matter?" he broke off, for Mr. Bright's face, as he turned to "the

stranger," had grown red with surprise and delight, and, raising his hat, he came forward with an eager exclamation of :

"Lord Gaunt!"

For an instant, but an instant only, Gaunt looked annoyed and embarrassed as he shook hands with the steward.

"How do you do, Bright?" he said. "Taken you by surprise, you see."

Bobby stared, then emitted a low whistle and grinned. But Decima's face wore no smile. It became red for a moment, then very pale, and her eyes sought Gaunt's, then hid themselves under their long lashes.

This man to whom she had been abusing Lord Gaunt was Lord Gaunt himself. Humiliation, shame and confusion fell upon her and seized her in their clutches while one could count twenty. Then something like resentment and anger took their place; and she drew back and turned her face away. But she could hear Lord Gaunt talking steadily and slowly, as if to afford time for the embarrassment to pass.

"Yes, I should have written to say I was coming. Bright; but, I—well—I didn't make up my mind until the last moment."

"Delighted to see you, my lord!" said Mr. Bright; "notice or no notice. Of course I should have preferred a short warning. The house—Well, I'm afraid the house is scarcely fit to receive you—"

"That's all right," said Gaunt. "I shall not stay long—half an hour—"

Mr. Bright looked at Bobby and Decima.

"This is Mr. Deane, of the Woodbines—a neighbor of yours, my lord," he said.

Lord Gaunt held out his hand to Bobby, upon whose face the grin still flickered.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Deane," he said.

"Thanks!" said Bobby. "And I'm glad to be able to thank you for the permission to fish. This is my sister, Decima."

Lord Gaunt went up to Decima, who stood perfectly still, and without making any response to the introduction.

"I cannot hope for forgiveness this time!" he said, in a low voice unheard by Bobby and Bright, who were a little apart, discussing the strangeness of Lord Gaunt's sudden and unannounced visit. "But you will admit that the temptation to conceal myself was very strong. If Mr. Bright had not turned up I should have got away without your learning that I was the 'heartless' owner of Leafmore."

Here Bright strode up, fortunately interrupting further conversation on a theme that was very distressing to Decima. He requested Lord Gaunt to come up to the Hall, as he had much to say to him.

Gaunt entreated Decima and her brother to accompany them, and the invitation was eagerly accepted by Bobby, who wished his sister to avail herself of the chance to inspect the art treasures of the Hall, which he himself had seen several times, thanks to the friendliness of Mr. Bright.

As the four moved from room to room, the two visitors inspecting various objects of interest, Lord Gaunt informed the delighted steward that in four days he intended to return to Leafmore and there take up his abode.

This sudden change of plan caused Decima to engage in deep reflection. She wondered why Lord Gaunt had so unexpectedly determined, after such a long absence, to make his home once more amid the scenes of his youth. She was still further amazed when he declared that it would please him to have Miss Deane join him, from time to time, with her advice in regard to several improvements he intended to make. He urged this upon her so earnestly that she gave a rather reluctant assent to do what she could to assist him in the way he had suggested.

When she reached Woodbines, after her visit to Leafmore, she was far in advance of Bobby, who had lingered behind to properly pack his fishing equipments. As she pushed open the door of the laboratory, she was surprised to hear her father's voice. He was talking rapidly, and in excited tones.

She shaded her eyes—for the sunlight poured in after her and dazzled her—and the first thing she saw was Mr. Theodore Mershon.

He was seated on the carpenter's bench, his small,

dapper form bent rather grotesquely, his feet resting on a stool, one hand nursing his chin, the other holding a big cigar, the fumes of which filled the room.

Her father was pacing up and down the room, a model in his hand, his hair ruffled over his head; and he was talking in excited, rhapsodical fashion.

"There is a large, an enormous fortune in this idea, for it is a great, and, above all, an original idea. My dear sir, I assure you—and I know what I am saying—that there is wealth beyond the dreams of avarice in this invention of mine! Who is this?"

"Father!" said Decima, as he stared at her vacantly. "It is I, Decima."

Mr. Mershon got off the bench, and removed his hat, which he had worn tilted at the back of his head.

"How do you do, Miss Deane?" he said, and a faint flush stained his face. "I have taken the pleasure of calling on Mr. Deane, and he has been explaining—"

"Yes, yes!" broke in Mr. Deane. "Very kind of Mr.—Mr."—he hesitated for a moment—"Mr. Curzon—"

"Mershon!" suggested the owner of the name.

"Pardon! Mershon. A gentleman of great intelligence, my dear Decima. I have been telling him of my new invention—concentrated electricity."

"A great invention, Miss Deane," said Mershon. "I think very highly of it. In my humble opinion there's money in it—a lot of money."

Mr. Deane wagged his head with proud satisfaction.

"A gentleman of great experience and intelligence, my dear Decima!"

"I am glad," said Decima, looking from one to the other with slightly drawn brows.

Mr. Theodore Mershon's eyes dwelt on her face.

"Of course I haven't heard the whole of it," he said. "But your father is going to explain and bring the drawings when you come to dine with me on Tuesday, Miss Deane."

The troubled look grew more distinct on Decima's face. "Are we—are we going, father?" she said.

"Yes! yes! Why not?" said Mr. Deane, testily. "Mr. Curzon is much interested in the idea—are you not, Mr. Curzon?"

"Very much," said that gentleman; and his small eyes devoured the girl's face. "Awfully! I'll cut off now, sir. I shall expect you on Tuesday, Miss Deane."

He held out his hand and it closed over Decima's with a pressure which made something within her rise with resentment.

She said nothing, not even "good-by," but, after he had gone, stood with downcast eyes as her father, pushing his hand through his tangled hair, and, pacing to and fro, muttered:

"A very sensible, intelligent young man! He understood me. And he is rich. He can help me—can help all of us! With his money and my brains—Eh? What did you say, Decima? Dinner? Already!" And, with a reluctant sigh, he suffered Decima to lead him out of the room.

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## CHAPTER VII.

DECIMA slept soundly that night—why should she not? For, as yet, love had not come to trouble her!—but she dreamed, and in her dreams Lord Gaunt and Theodore Mershon were inextricably mixed; their voices, the one deep and musical, the other sharp and metallic, clashed together, and once she started uneasily, as if she felt Mr. Mershon's thin, claw-like fingers imprisoning hers.

As the days passed the improvements at Leafmore went on, and frequently Mr. Bright consulted Decima as to the interior furnishings of the Hall. The master had business which called him to the metropolis, and for over a week he was absent; consequently he and Miss Deane did not meet during that time. She was therefore the less reluctant to aid Mr. Bright by her suggestions.

On Tuesday, according to agreement, the Deanes, father, son and daughter—took dinner at the Firs. The house-keeper was introduced by Mr. Mershon as his half-sister, Mrs. Sherborne. She was past middle age, with a thin figure and a pale, sad face; her ruling expression strongly suggestive of nervousness and timidity.

During the meal Mr. Mershon grew eloquent in descanting on his business ventures—how he had originated the Great Wheat Mining Company, and cleared a quarter of

a million before it went to smash. He also mentioned various other financial achievements of a similar character; and it was plain that if his statements were true, he was a remarkably clever man.

He extolled Mr. Deane's invention, saying there were untold millions in it if properly handled, and he suggested a scheme by which it could be put upon the market. This pleased the visionary inventor, and as he said good-bye to his host, he thought that Mr. Mershon was an uncommonly bright gentleman.

When the guests had departed, Mr. Mershon announced to Mrs. Sherborne that it was his intention to make Miss Deane his wife, and that he required her to take every opportunity to win the good opinion of the inventor's daughter, and sing his praises to her.

"But she is so—so very young, Theodore," replied Mrs. Sherborne, deprecatingly.

"Young!" exclaimed Mr. Mershon, his eyes flashing angrily. "I like her all the better for that. D——n it, you don't suppose I would be such an ass as to fall in love with an old woman! And I've fallen in love with her, I tell you!"

"She—she may not consent. I—I mean, she seems to have some will of her own, Theodore; I have been talking to her—"

"Consent! Will of her own!" he said, with a sneer. "You are an idiot! Do you suppose I'm depending upon her sweet will only? Not I! I know a better game than that. She'll consent fast enough. You wait and see! I've got her tight enough; or, if I haven't got her already I shall have her in my grip presently."

From that day his attentions to Decima were marked and they were frequently together. He used all his arts to win her esteem, and with delight he saw that she was pleased with his gallantries, which never surpassed the bounds of propriety. On the return of Lord Gaunt to Leafmore he was among the first to witness these attentions, and he contemplated them with eyes of jealousy. In Theodore Mershon the nobleman saw a possibly successful rival, and he, too, lavished much attention upon Decima. They rode together, drove out together, and the Deanes were often welcome guests at the Hall. Lord

Gaunt was delighted to note that Decima was a graceful rider, and he presented to her a half-thoroughbred horse named Nero.

On Decima's first trial of this spirited steed she was eager to test the animal's agility, and she forced him at a thick hedge. Nero bounded forward, and just as he was about to spring he made a false step, stumbled, and the fair rider was in imminent peril of a fall. But Lord Gaunt was close beside her, and dexterously caught her in his arms. There he held her close to his breast for about two seconds, and then released her and aided her to remount. In those two seconds a dream of happiness flashed through his brain.

On the ride homeward he was almost silent, but deeply reflective. Having left his fair companion at Woodbines, he hastened to Leafmore, went direct to his study and lighted a cigar. He could feel the lithe, graceful figure still in his arms, still feel her breath on his cheek.

Suddenly he flung the cigar in the fireplace and threw his hands above his head with a wild, despairing gesture.

"Oh, my God!" he cried. "Not that! Not that!" But the prayer came too late, and he knew it. "I love her!" he cried, as the sweat of his anguish broke upon his brow. "I love her! I love her!"

There was more pain than pleasure in the thought, for there was keen agony in the realization that he, a married man, was in love with Decima Deane!

"My God!" he exclaimed, "how will this end?"

He loved her, and he knew that this was the first real love of his life. The fancy for the woman who bore his name had been merely a fancy, and companionship, close intimacy, had changed that fancy to loathing and contempt.

Decima alone was the idol of his heart. In her presence he saw charms that no other woman of his acquaintance had ever revealed, and he was comparatively happy when enjoying her society.

With some plans in his hand for the construction of a couple of cottages he was about to erect, he called at the Woodbines, intending to show the plans to her, and get her opinion as to the interior arrangements of the dwellings. At the time she was adjusting some bunches of ivy and clematis which overhung the porch. Her tresses be-

came entangled in the process, and he assisted her to release the silky coil. While he was thus engaged a little piece of brown ribbon which had been used to confine her hair, dropped to the ground, unperceived by Decima.

He secured it, and, holding it in his hand, said :

“ If you don’t particularly need this, I’ll tie up the plans with it.”

She cheerfully assented, but a few minutes later she observed that the plans were still without a confining circlet. She did not know that the little piece of brown ribbon was at that moment neatly placed in his vest pocket, close to his heart.

That evening, in the solitude of his own room, having dismissed Hobson, his valet, he stood with the little piece of ribbon in his hand, contemplating it silently.

“ What a fool I am ! ” he exclaimed, at last. “ I am living in a fool’s paradise, and I shall awake presently to find myself in—in the other place. I’ll burn this. Yes, I’ll burn it—and—and try to forget her.”

He held the little piece of ribbon to the candle, but he drew it back instantly, with something like a groan on his lips.

The ribbon slept on his heart that night, and every night, and his heart said to it, “ I love her ! I love her ! ” and the ribbon murmured back, “ I know it.”

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## CHAPTER VIII.

LORD GAUNT, by many generous acts, won the friendship of Bobby Deane, and the latter thought him one of the grandest fellows in the world. Bobby was about to start for London, by the advice of his tutors, to brush up in his French and German, and prepare for his school examination. This movement did not meet the favor of Lord Gaunt, who saw that Bobby’s absence would limit his opportunities for seeing Decima, to whom the brother had officiated as a sort of chaperon.

Still, it was absolutely necessary for the boy to go, to prepare himself for entering the army, and Lord Gaunt could not consistently make any objection. He generously offered to Bobby the free use of his London apartments,

during his sojourn in the metropolis, stating that he would be doing him a service if he occupied them. He also promised the young man to write for him a letter of introduction to the Orient Club, of which Lord Gaunt had long been a member. This letter would undoubtedly secure for him all the privileges of the club, and Bobby was in the seventh heaven of delight as he warmly grasped the nobleman's hand and expressed his acceptance and deep gratitude.

Decima, who was present on this occasion, also manifested her appreciation of these favors, and artlessly said :

“I wonder why you are so kind to us all ?”

It was evident to the nobleman that he could not have discovered a quicker method to intrench himself in Decima's heart.

On the day succeeding the events just recorded, Bobby was on his way to London. Lord Gaunt's letter of introduction had preceded him ; and, of course, the young man was assured of a welcome. Decima missed the badinage and playful habits of her brother, but she was not at all lonely, for on that very afternoon Lord Gaunt was her attendant on an exploring trip through the woodland of Leafmore. It was an accidental meeting, he having seen her strolling along with a little flower basket on her arm, and joined her.

“Oh, what beautiful lilies !” she exclaimed, as she noticed a massive bunch of these aquatic plants floating near the edge of the adjacent stream.

“I'll get some of them for you,” he said, as he knelt on the bank, and, slipping back the sleeves of his coat and shirt from his left arm.

Suddenly, as he plunged his arm into the water, and drew up the lilies by their long stems, she caught sight of some black marks or scars on the bare flesh.

“What are those marks on your arm ?” she asked.

He was busy cutting the stems, and was off his guard for a moment.

“Oh, nothing,” he said, pulling down his sleeve. “Caustic marks. I got a seratch or two from a young lion. There are the lilies. And very pretty they are. Let me put them in your basket.”

She stood stockstill, the blood rushing to her face and

then away from it again, her eyes fixed on his face with a strange look in them. She remembered the Zoo and the young lion, the swift outstretching of his arm to save her, the sound of the rent cloth. The lion had torn his arm then!

For a moment something beat in her heart, a pulsation which almost deprived her of breath. She longed to take the arm, and press her lips to the black marks; for he had got them in saving her. They should have been on her arm instead of his! Her eyes grew hot, and filled with tears, and the first thrill of love ran through her veins, though she did not know it. Troubled, perplexed, fighting against this feeling with all a girl's instinctive dread of passion, she held out the basket, then as soon as he had placed the lilies in it, she turned her head away.

"I must go," she said. "It is late, and—good-by!" And she left him suddenly, her whole being quivering. He had not seen her face—he had been engaged with the lilies—and he suspected nothing of the emotions which had swept over her young heart.

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It was late that very afternoon when Bobby walked into the Orient, walked in with that sense of proud possession which the young man feels in his first club. He made his way through the imposing hall with its solemn porters and stately footmen into the handsome smoking-room, and lighting a cigarette, took up a paper—not to read, but as a screen from which he could look at the other members who were present; for Bobby was a stranger, and every one who belonged to the Orient was of interest to him. He knew some by sight, or from their photographs displayed in the shop windows—for there were some famous men in the club—and he was wondering whether he should get to know any of them personally, when two men entered through the great glass doors.

Bobby looked at them curiously. One was a tall, fair, very fair man, with a clean-shaven face, handsome, frank-looking blue eyes, and lips wearing a peculiarly pleasant and winning smile. The other was a younger man—of Bobby's age—with red hair and a pale face. He was plain; but there was something of suppressed force in the rather sullen-looking face which was noticeable. His eyes were

somewhat bloodshot, and as he looked from side to side they had a suggestion of ferocity, of savageness, held in check by their owner—which made them still more remarkable.

Bobby took a second glance at him; then, with an exclamation, rose to his feet. For he had suddenly recognized the young man as a schoolmate.

“ Hallo, Trevor !” he said, holding out his hand.

The young fellow eyed him with a frown for a moment, then he said, without any great display of joy :

“ Hallo, Deane ! Didn’t know you were in town.”

“ No,” said Bobby, in his bright way. “ It is a long time since we met.”

“ Not since we left that beastly Rugby,” said Trevor, gloomily. “ Are you staying up for any time ?”

“ For a month or two,” said Bobby.

The fair man stood looking at them with a pleasant smile in his blue eyes, and on his well-cut lips.

“ A meeting of old friends, Trevor ?” he said, in a soft and musical voice. “ Will you introduce me, my dear fellow ?”

Trevor glowered for a moment at the thick Turkey carpet as if he had a grudge against it, then he said, sullenly :

“ It’s an old schoolmate of mine—Mr. Deane. This is a friend, Deane—Mr. Thorpe, Morgan Thorpe.”

Mr. Morgan Thorpe held out his hand with a winning smile.

“ Delighted to know any friend of Trevor’s !” he said “ And very glad to find you are a member of the old club, Mr. Deane !”

There was something flattering in the speech and its manner which made Bobby flush with pleasure.

“ And what are you doing—just on a pleasant visit to the little village ?” asked Mr. Thorpe. “ Shall we sit down, Trevor ? Mr. Deane, you will join us in a drink ?”

Bobby said he would have coffee, and it was brought in company with the soda and whiskey for the other men.

“ I’m grinding for the army,” said Bobby.

“ Ah ! I envy you,” said Mr. Thorpe, in the same flattering way. “ Nothing like the service. I was in it for some years.”

"What regiment?" asked Bobby, who of course knew his Army List by heart.

"Not an English one, alas!" said Mr. Thorpe, blandly. "I was in foreign service. A free lance, Mr. Deane. A free lance! I have my brevet-colonelcy; but, of course, I don't use it here. I am a civilian in England; but over there——"

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders, Bobby would have asked where "over there" was, but didn't like to.

"Deane—Deane? Let me see! Are you one of the Deanes of Leamington?" continued Mr. Thorpe.

"No," said Bobby. "I live at a place called Leafmore!"

"Ah! I know the Deanes of Leamington very well. Leafmore?"—he shot a swift glance from his blue eyes at Bobby—"Leafmore, in Downshire?—I've heard of it. Now, what shall we do? What do you say to a game of pool?"

Bobby had to confess that he didn't play billiards.

"Never too late to learn, my dear fellow!" said Mr. Thorpe. "I'm a deuced bad player myself, or I'd offer to teach you; but Trevor is a first-class performer with the stick and the spheres. Come on, Trevor, and give us both a lesson."

Trevor got up with a kind of reluctance, and they went into the billiard room. Trevor and Thorpe played and Bobby took his first lesson—in marking. Thorpe played, as he had said, indifferently, and appeared to take more interest in chatting with Bobby than in the game. He talked well; Bobby thought he had never met a more charming man, or one more frank and candid, and, really, almost childlike in his genial simplicity. In the course of an hour Bobby felt as if he had known Mr. Morgan Thorpe for years. Trevor said little, but played with a kind of moody absorption, and made some splendid breaks.

Presently Mr. Morgan Thorpe glanced at his watch.

"I say! Time, time! Dear me, how quickly it has flown. That's thanks to you, Deane!" He had dropped the "Mr." already; which was really very friendly of him. "We must be going, Trevor; we dine early, you know. Oh, by the way, Deane, I wonder whether I could persuade you to waive ceremony and come and dine with us

to-night. When I say 'us' I mean my sister and myself—and Trevor, of course. We shall be quite en famille, you know, and I can assure you that my sister will be very pleased to see you. A friend of our dear Trevor's has the surest passport—eh, Trevor?"

Trevor did not respond with a smile to the simile, but glanced at Bobby, and then sullenly made a red hazard.

"Thank you," said Bobby. "I shall be much pleased."

"Now, that's very good of you!" said Mr. Morgan Thorpe, gratefully. "We dine at seven-thirty. Early, isn't it? But you won't mind, just once in a way! My sister—well, my sister is rather delicate, and goes to bed early. Seven-thirty. How stupid of me! I had forgotten the address!"

He took a card from his case, and gave it to Bobby with a charming smile. The card bore this inscription:

Mr. Morgan Thorpe,  
31 Cardigan Terrace, S. W.

Bobby put the card in his pocket, said he would be punctual, and the two men left the club.

When they got outside Trevor said gloomily:

"Why the devil did you ask him to dinner? It wasn't necessary. Don't know much of him—an old schoolmate."

Morgan Thorpe smiled.

"My dear fellow, that's no reason why you shouldn't know more of him. I've taken a fancy to him; have indeed! Besides, he will be a pleasant addition to our little party."

Mr. Thorpe hummed a bright little air, and Trevor muttered something under his breath. They walked to Cardigan Terrace, and Thorpe stopped outside No 31.

"No use asking you to come in, I suppose?" he said blandly.

Trevor looked with a kind of savage wistfulness up at the windows, then shaking his head.

"No; I shall be here at seven-thirty."

"So long, then, dear boy," said Thorpe, and he went up the steps and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a maid-servant, a middle-aged

woman, with the unmistakable face and manner of a Frenchwoman.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked, in her language.

"In the dressing-room," replied the woman, shooting a glance at the departing Trevor.

Morgan Thorpe went up the narrow stairs; the houses in Cardigan Terrace are small—not to say poky—and knocked at the door. A low, clear voice, with a singular metallic ring in it, said: "Come in," and he entered.

The room was richly but garishly furnished: the air was thick with perfume—there was an odor of cheap scent all over the house, by the way—and the hangings of rose pink were soiled and stained. At a muslin-covered dressing-table sat a lady. She was in a dressing peignoir—also rather soiled—over which was a mass of black hair, hung like a torrent. She was small but pretty, more than pretty, for no one had ever looked at her face without being more or less fascinated. The features were small and exquisitely chiseled; her eyes were black as sloes and remarkably expressive; they could be sharp and brilliant, and they could be soft and languorous, just as their owner chose. Her face was pale, of that ivory whiteness which sometimes goes with black hair.

She was beautifully formed, and very graceful, with hands and feet like a fairy. In short, she was a beautiful little woman, with the face and the charm of a siren, and with about as much heart.

She turned the corners of her dark eyes upon her brother for a second, then went on with her occupation, which was the application of rice powder to her beautiful face, and she did it with the delicate touch of a skilled artist.

"Well," she said, as he looked down at her with a smile, and there was a world of significance in the word.

"A new friend is coming to dinner, my dear Laura," he said.

She looked at him in the glass.

"Who is it?"

"A friend of Trevor's," he said. "A young fellow by the name of Deane. Quite a boy—a charming boy."

She made a slight, contemptuous move.

"Ah, do not despise the day of small things, my charming sister!" he said, lightly.

"I hate boys!" she said. "And a friend of Trevor's—sulky and sullen and awkward as himself, I suppose!"

"On the contrary, a handsome, nicely-mannered, and, as I have said, quite charming boy."

"He will be a change, at any rate," she said. "I am getting wearied of that bear—"

"Take care you do not let the bear see it!" he said, warningly. "We have not yet got all the bear's skin, my dear Laura!"

She smiled.

"And is this boy coming only because you have taken a fancy to him?" she asked, as she drew a thin, exquisitely thin, line under her eyes. "What—who is he?"

"Cramming for the army," he said.

She smiled contemptuously.

"I know the kind. An allowance of a hundred a year, and promised his dear, good mother down at the parsonage that he wouldn't play. Oh, I know!"

"I don't know what his allowance may be," he said, "but I fancy he will be worth a little attention, my dear Laura." He took up a newspaper which lay—with a fan and a lady's silver cigarette case—on the couch. "See here." He read aloud :

"THE GREAT ELECTRIC STORAGE COMPANY, LIMITED,  
CAPITAL, £100,000,

Directors :

Lord Borrowmore, Esq., Impecunie Castle,

Theodore Mershon, Esq., The Firs, Leafmore.

Peter Deane, Esq., Woodbines, Leafmore."

"See? The son of a man who is in the swim with Theodore Mershon ought to be worth a little attention. You are looking sweet to-night, my dear Laura. What are you going to wear? That soft yellow dress with the—er—low neck? Right! He's a nice boy. A nice, frank boy. The sort of boy to fall in love with—"

He pointed to the glass in which the fascinating face was reflected and with a soft laugh left the room.

## CHAPTER IX.

BOBBY dressed himself with more than his usual care that evening, and brushed his short but wavy hair until it shone like raw silk. It was his first invitation to dinner since he had been in London, and he was quite in a small state of excitement about it.

Punctually at seven-thirty he presented himself at 31 Cardigan Terrace and was shown by the French maid into the small drawing-room. It was the usual London drawing-room ; there were a good many colors in it, and it looked rather gay to Bobby after the rather shabby one at home ; but the cretonne was rather dirty, and there was an odor of scent and cigarettes which rather surprised him.

The door opened and Mr. Morgan Thorpe entered. He looked very handsome in evening dress, and he welcomed Bobby most cordially.

“Delighted to see you, my dear Deane,” he said, with his winning smile. “Trevor is not here yet ; my sister will be down presently. Did I tell you that she is a widow ? Poor girl ! She lost her husband soon after her marriage. It was not altogether a happy union—but I must not bore you with our family history ; suffice it that Time has healed her wound and restored something of her old happiness. I think you will like her, my dear Deane. She is a dear girl—for she is only a girl still—and a great comfort and joy to my life.”

At this moment the door opened and the great comfort and joy of Mr. Morgan Thorpe’s life entered. She certainly did look only a girl, and Bobby was startled, not only by her youth, but by her beauty. There was something about her which literally took the boy’s breath away.

At that moment her face wore a pensive expression, and the dark eyes were soft and sad, the red lips half apart. The beautiful dress of yellow, accentuated the clear whiteness of her skin and the black hair and brows. She held a black fan in one hand and a bunch of white flowers in the other. Altogether, she was a vision of grace and

loveliness calculated to move a more experienced man than Bobby to wonder and admiration.

"This is our friend—Mr. Deane," said Morgan Thorpe. "My sister—Mrs. Dalton."

She laid down the fan and gave her small hand to Bobby, with a smile which showed her white, even teeth to perfection, and said she was glad to see him. Commonplace words enough, but they sounded wonderful to Bobby, for the gods, when they are in good humor, are wont to be lavish of their gifts, and they had bestowed upon this woman not only grace of form and a beautiful face, but a soft and musical voice, which she could play on as a skilled musician plays on his favorite instrument.

"You find our ménage very small, I have no doubt, my dear Deane," said Morgan Thorpe. "We have taken this house furnished, and though it is not all that we could desire, it is large enough for two, and my sister and I possess contented minds, though I must confess that we do find the house rather small after our palazzo in Florence. It was lent to us by our dear friend, the prince."

He did not say which, but Bobby was duly impressed.

"Ours has been rather a wandering life," continued Mr. Morgan Thorpe, "and though we may have many friends abroad we have very few in London."

"Mr. Deane will be a host in himself, I am sure," said Laura, very sweetly and with a slight foreign accent, which made her voice seem still more charming to Bobby, who blushed with pleasure.

Then Trevor came in. He did not look very much better tempered than when Bobby had parted from him. He gave the two men a nod and a scowl, and, going straight up to Laura, handed her a bouquet.

"Got them coming along," he said; "thought you'd like to have them."

She took the flowers and thanked him with a smile, and he sat down beside her and talked in an undertone. The French maid announced dinner.

"Deane, will you take in my sister?" said Mr. Morgan Thorpe.

Trevor had already offered his arm and he let it fall to his side and scowled at Bobby as he bore Laura off.

It was a delightful evening for Bobby, who felt that

he was in the presence of an amiable hostess, lovely, artless and bewitching. At the dinner, at which wine flowed freely, she was most attentive to her new guest, and insinuatingly encouraged him in conversation, which revealed much of himself and his family. The meal over, Thorpe suggested a game of cards, but as Bobby was rather inexperienced in this form of pastime, the siren entertained him with vocal and piano music while her brother and Trevor, at the other end of the room, amused themselves at *ecarté*, and the stakes were not light.

The siren had an exquisite voice, and sang with almost artistic effect. Bobby was fascinated as he listened. Occasionally between the songs she would wander over to the card players and take her station behind Trevor, leaning on the back of his chair. On these occasions she would sometimes strike her hair with her left hand, and sometimes with her right, all the time keeping up a playful chatter, but never once looking at Thorpe. These movements, however, were not lost upon her brother, who regulated his play and wagers according to the signs thus quickly displayed by the siren. It was a well-understood system of telegraphy, and when Trevor arose from the table he was the loser to a considerable amount.

At a late hour the guests prepared for departure. Trevor went up to Laura, and, drawing her aside, talked to her in a low voice. She listened with a pensive smile the non-committal smile which a woman knows how to manage so well. Then she glided from him to Bobby.

"I hope you will come to see us often," she said in a low voice.

Bobby tried to murmur his thanks.

The French maid appeared with a spirit stand. Bobby had some whiskey, though he didn't want it. His brain was in a whirl ; his bright eyes were flashing ; his heart was beating fast. Laura was standing beside him smiling up at him with a friendly—almost loving—smile.

"I wonder whether you would come and dine with me ?" he said, looking round with boyish eagerness, his eyes resting, however, on the beautiful face beside him. "I've got rooms at Prince's Mansions. They are not mine really ; they belong to a friend of mine—an awfully good fellow—Lord Gaunt——"

Mr. Morgan Thorpe, who alone heard this, was mixing himself a glass of whiskey. He was just pouring in a small quantity of water, and with an awkwardness scarcely to be expected of so cool a hand, he let the carafe slip from his grasp. The water poured over the table, and in the confusion Bobby's speech was almost unnoticed.

"How clumsy of me!" exclaimed Morgan Thorpe. "Forgive me, my dear Laura! We shall be delighted, my dear Deane—delighted! Must you really be going? Ah, well! the happiest hours come to a finish."

Laura went out into the small hall as the two men put on their light overcoats. Bobby found some difficulty with his, and she helped him with her small white hands.

"You will come again?" she said.

"Yes—yes, indeed," said Bobby. "If you will be so good as to ask me."

He got outside and the cool evening air struck upon his heated brow. He felt as if he had come from an enchanted palace, in which a beautiful creature, with soft, black eyes, had reigned like a queen of the fairies.

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## CHAPTER X.

A SEVERE headache was a painful reminder to Bobby the next morning of the previous evening's dissipation. For, under the witching eyes of the fair hostess he had indulged in stimulants almost recklessly. Late that afternoon he received a visit from Morgan Thorpe, who viewed Lord Gaunt's apartments with affected delight and curiosity, as if it were the first time he had ever seen them. He advised Bobby to conceal from Mrs. Dalton the fact that the rooms were not his own, for she might hesitate to visit an acquaintance in apartments belonging to another party. They then sauntered to the Orient Club together, and for days afterward they frequently met there. Bobby was surely becoming quite intimate with Morgan Thorpe, and was "seeing life" under an experienced tutor.

Then followed another dinner at Cardigan Terrace, in which the entertainment of the previous visit was re-

peated, with a slight variation—that Bobby was induced to take part in the card-playing with Trevor and Thorpe. Strange to say, he quit the game a winner to a small extent.

To make some slight return for the hospitality of his new friends, he invited them to his apartments a few days later, and they sat down to a meal that would not have discredited a man of boundless wealth. Mrs. Dalton lavished her smiles upon the young host in such an effective way that Trevor observed the siren with eyes in which fires of jealousy blazed.

Cards were proposed, but as Bobby said he was without them the idea was about to be abandoned when Thorpe suddenly remembered that he had a couple of packs in his pocket. These having been produced, the three men sat down, and were soon engaged in a game which lasted for hours.

The same system of telegraphy noted heretofore was practised for the benefit of Morgan, Mrs. Dalton standing behind Bobby's chair, exchanging playful banter with the three players. The result was that at the close of the game the artless novice was a debtor to both of his contestants. He owed Trevor fifty-six pounds and Morgan Thorpe a hundred and twenty-four.

As this announcement was made by Thorpe, Bobby's face fell, and he began to utter words of apology to express his inability to meet his losses.

"I'm sorry! I'm—I'm afraid—" he stammered.

"My dear fellow," said Morgan Thorpe, laughing carelessly, "I did not suppose you carried so much money in your waistcoat pocket! No one does. You will do the usual thing, of course? Just give me an I O U. or, better still, a little bill. Strange, but I have one about me!"

He produced a sheet of blue paper partly filled up, and laid it on the table.

"Sign that, my dear Deane. It is only a matter of form. Between friends, you know. You need not pay until it is convenient: in fact, Trevor and I don't care very much whether you pay or not. We have had such a delightful evening. Delightful! By Jove! I have never had a more abso-lu-te-ly perfect dinner! Eh, Laura?"

Laura thus appealed to, murmured something in

Bobby's ears, and Bobby, taking the stylographic pen which Mr. Morgan Thorpe offered him, signed his name across the blue paper. His head was swimming, his whole being thrilling under the touch of her hand, the music of her murmuring voice. He would have done anything—signed anything.

With a fond and vacuous smile he wrapped her cloak around her.

"Let me arrange a bouquet for you," he said, in a husky whisper as he went to the dining-table, and there chose some flowers which had adorned the feast.

She pressed the bouquet to her lips and looked across it at him with a sad smile.

"If we had only met earlier!" she murmured.

Bobby went down to the brougham with them, and as she entered she pressed his hand so warmly that he ventured to raise her small, white hand to his lips.

The brougham rattled away, and the divine Laura leaned back with a yawn and a sigh.

Trevor bent forward, his bloodshot eyes gleaming upon her.

"How long is this going to last?" he asked, hoarsely.

She shrugged her shoulders, and glanced at her brother.

"Ask him!" she said.

Mr. Morgan Thorpe laughed.

"My dear Trevor!" he said, remonstratingly. "You surely are not jealous! Of a boy like that!" and Trevor, with a smothered oath subsided.

Meanwhile Bobby sat at the table with the cards strewn around him, and thought of the divine Laura. He could feel her perfumed breath upon his cheek, and could hear her voice still ringing in his ears.

He did not remember how much he had lost; did not reflect that he was the son of a poor man, with limited allowance. He only thought of that beautiful face and sweet voice, and—reader, did you ever hear the song of "The Spider and the Fly?"

## CHAPTER XI.

FOR weeks thereafter Mr. Deane was amazed by the frequency of Bobby's letters requesting remittances ; but he responded to them with generosity, yet cautioning his son to be prudent. This matter worried the old gentleman considerably, yet the worriment passed away in the excitement attending the preparations for a grand reception at Leafmore Hall, to which he and his daughter were invited. Bobby, too, received an invitation, but he had to forego the pleasure, as he found it inconvenient to leave London.

The reception was a great success, and Decima won golden opinions from every one, especially from the Countess of Roborough, an estimable middle-aged lady, an old friend of the Gaunts, who had been persuaded to officiate as hostess. During an interval between the dances a daughter of Lord Ferndale was called to the piano. She was a lovely girl and possessed a voice of rare power and sweetness. She sang with such artistic effect that all ears were entranced.

“What a beautiful girl ! and what a magnificent voice !” involuntarily exclaimed Decima at the close of the song.

Near the speaker sat Lady Ferndale, although Decima was unaware of that fact. She was fond and proud of her daughter, and the girlish burst of enthusiasm touched her deeply.

“Thank you, Miss Deane,” she said smiling. “That was a spontaneous tribute, and I am grateful. I am the singer's mother.”

Thus another stanch friend was added to Decima's list of admirers.

To Decima there was only one unpleasant feature of the entertainment. That was the persistence of Theodore Mershon in seeking every chance to monopolize her company. He even was so precipitate as to ask her hand in marriage, and preceded the offer with a glowing picture of his abundant wealth.

The proposal was so sudden and so blunt that she was positively startled, and turned pale.

“Oh, stop ! stop !” she exclaimed. “You pain me with

such an offer, I have given you no encouragement, and I hope you will let the matter end here, at once and forever."

Before Mr. Mershon could recover from his amazement at this decided rebuff, Lord Gaunt fortunately came up to claim Decima's hand for a promised waltz, and in a few minutes Mershon's eyes glowed with rage and hatred as he saw the girl he admired whirling in the dance, her graceful waist encircled by the arm of Lord Gaunt.

The couple had not made the circuit of the room more than twice when Lord Gaunt found that his partner's feet failed to keep step to the rhythm of the music, and she was a dead weight in his arms. She had fainted.

They were at that part of the room from which an entrance led to the fernery. Without attracting attention, he passed through the doorway, holding the lovely, inanimate girl close to his heart.

They were alone, and he gazed down at the marble-pale face—all his soul in his eyes. His love overmastered him, and he passionately touched his lips to hers.

"Decima!" he whispered. "My darling! my darling!"

His lips were hot with the fervor of passion, and their fire seemed to warm her back to life. She shuddered and opened her eyes and recognized him.

"I—am—so—glad!" she murmured, unconsciously. The thought of Mershon's impetuous wooing had caused her to faint, and she recovered from her swoon with the belief that she was in that man's embrace. The loving glances which met hers at once convinced her of the unreality of her horrid dream; therefore it was with unusual warmth that she once more exclaimed "I—am—so—glad!"

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The next morning while at breakfast Decima received a visit from Mr. Bright, who conveyed to her the startling intelligence that Lord Gaunt had suddenly and unexpectedly left Leafmore for an indefinite time.

"I am afraid he is in trouble," continued the steward, "for Hobson told me that his master acted quite strangely last night, as if he had heard bad news. Anyway, he has gone, and we may not see him again for years."

A weight seemed suddenly to have fallen upon Decima's heart. She was speechless as she mechanically walked to the window. The sun was shining brightly, but as she stared wonderingly out at the little garden a cloud passed over the orb of day. Was it typical of the darkness which had come to obscure the brightness of her life?

There was another disagreeable surprise for Decima that day. Mr. Mershon met her in the garden some hours later, and informed her that the Electric Storage Company, the stock of which he had been endeavoring to float, was likely to prove a financial failure, and that her father, who had risked most of his savings on it, would in such an event be a heavy loser.

"I cautioned your father," said Mr. Mershon, "not to go into it too heavily, but he seems so certain of the success of the thing that I shouldn't be surprised if he'd sunk a greater portion of his fortune in it."

Decima regarded him with troubled eyes.

"And—and you think he will lose it?" she said, in a low voice.

"I shouldn't wonder," he answered. "That's the worst of these inventions; there's generally a screw loose somewhere."

"What shall I do?" said Decima to herself.

Mershon picked a leaf off a rosebush, examined it critically and glanced up at her in his covert way.

"I'm afraid your father's a bit worried about your brother, Miss Decima, isn't he?" he said.

Decima stared at him.

"My brother?" she said.

"Yes," replied Mershon, picking the leaf to pieces with his long nails. "Seems to have been going the pace. Been writing to your father for more money again!"

"Bobby!" exclaimed Decima. "I—I don't understand!"

"Oh, it's a way young fellows have when they get up to London," said Mershon. "I dare say it isn't serious, and he'll pull through. Good-morning."

Decima did not return the adieu, and he came back and glanced at her again.

"So Lord Gaunt's off!" he said. "Thought he'd cut

the place all of a sudden, like this. Gone to Africa, I hear."

The red flooded Decima's face for an instant, then left it pale again.

Mershon stood with his eyes fixed on the ground.

"You haven't forgotten what I said to you last night, Miss Decima?" he said. "Whatever happens, you can rely on my friendship. Good-morning."

He held out his hand, and Decima just touched it with her fingers; then she went to her father and asked for an explanation.

Mr. Deane launched into a torrent of words to prove that his invention was impregnable; but it is needless to say that they carried no conviction to Decima's mind.

"And what is this about Bobby, father?" she asked anxiously.

Mr. Deane paced up and down and tore at his hair.

"I don't know! I don't understand!" he said, impatiently, "Your brother Robert keeps writing for money, and says that he has incurred debts which must be discharged at once. I have sent him all the money I can. Yesterday I had a letter from my bankers saying that I have overdrawn my account. Mr. Mershon has been kind enough to lend me a hundred pounds——"

"Mr. Mershon!" said Decima, faintly.

"Yes, yes!" responded Mr. Deane. "He is extremely kind. I don't know what I should do without him——"

Decima stole out of the laboratory, feeling faint and sick.

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## CHAPTER XII.

THAT night she wrote to Bobby. There was not a word of reproach in the loving letter; she only begged him to come home, if only for a day. Not until five days afterward did she receive a hurried scrawl from Bobby, saying it was impossible for him to leave London just then, but that he would run down as soon as he possibly could. The letter was so unlike him—there was not a touch of Bobby's brightness in it—that it filled Decima with dismay and foreboding.

The days passed. It seemed to her as if there were

forty-eight hours in each of them instead of twenty-four; she felt so lonely and as if something had gone out of her life. She grew pale and listless.

When she went for a walk she avoided the gates of the Leafmore Lodge, and if she were compelled to pass them she would not glance up the avenue.

She tried to forget Lord Gaunt, not as one who has loved and lost, for she did not know that she loved him, would have been startled if the idea had entered her head for a moment; but she felt that, yielding to Mr. Bright's entreaties, she had done her insignificant best to keep Lord Gaunt among his people and had failed.

But it was hard to forget a man whose name she was constantly hearing. The village people were always talking of him and deplored his absence. The county families were indignant at his sudden flight, and the local papers shed an inky tear over it.

Lady Ferndale, the Countess of Roborough, and several of their friends had called upon Decima, and would have welcomed her into their set, but Decima felt as if, like Lord Gaunt, she hated society. She shrank into her shell, as it were, and the great ladies after awhile gave up the attempt to woo her from it.

The only persons she saw were Mr. Mershon and Mrs. Sherborne. He came to the Woodbines nearly every day, and Mrs. Sherborne very often accompanied him, and sat with Decima in the drawing-room, while her brother talked to Mr. Deane in the laboratory.

Mrs. Sherborne watched Decima with a covert scrutiny which made her feel restless and nervous. She was beginning to feel as if a net were being drawn round her.

And yet she could not complain of Mr. Mershon. He was too clever to harass her with attentions, and his manner toward her was one of the deepest respect and deference.

Sometimes Mrs. Sherborne brought a magnificent bunch of orchids from the Firs, and only sometimes she casually mentioned that Theodore had cut the blooms with his own hands.

Now and again Decima met Mr. Bright. Indeed, he sought her as of old, and asked her advice and assistance in carrying out the benevolent schemes which he always

declared she had started, and Decima tried to throw her heart into the work which she had begun so eagerly ; but she seemed to have no heart to throw. Now and again she asked Mr. Bright if he had heard from or of Lord Gaunt, but he always replied in the negative, with a shake of the head and a sigh.

One afternoon she came back from the village feeling tired and listless. She took off her things, and then went down to a little room at the back of the house, where she kept her pets.

It had grown into quite a small menagerie, for, in addition to the guinea pigs and white mice she had brought with her, there were other pets which Lord Gaunt had given her. There were some Belgian hares, a rakish-looking jackdaw, who was quite a linguist in his way, a tame hawk, and a couple of Norwegian rats, to say nothing of a tortoise and a case of green lizards.

Gaunt had given her these from time to time, bringing them up in his pocket and stealing a secret joy in her girlish delight at receiving them.

As Decima fed and played with her pets, she remembered the happy minutes she had spent with Lord Gaunt in the room ; how he had told her the history of each of the animals, and had been coaxed by her into narrating some of his hunting stories. She could almost see him as he had leaned against the wall, smoking his cigarette, and smiling down at her as she knelt beside one of the cages. He had never been anything else but kind to her ever since the first day she had met him. Now he was gone, and she should, perhaps, never see him again !

She sighed as she took the jackdaw on her hand and stroked his black plumes, and the bird croaked as if in sympathy.

Suddenly the door opened, and looking round she saw Bobby. She sprang to her feet with a glad cry, and flung her arms round Bobby's neck, the jackdaw flying with a shriek to the ceiling. Then, as she looked up into his face, she drew back with a little cry of alarm and apprehension.

Was this Bobby, the bright, laughing-eyed boy, whose every word was a jest—this pale young man, with gaunt cheeks and black marks under his eyes ?

"Bobby!" she exclaimed. "What is the matter—are you ill?"

The flush rose to his haggard face for a moment, and he averted the eyes which had hitherto met hers so straightly.

"I am rather seedy, Decie," he said. "It's—it's the London life."

He sat down on one of the cages, and she sat close beside him, and got hold of one of his hands and pressed and dragged at it anxiously.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" she said. "And, oh, Bobby, you must be ill to look like that!"

"I didn't know until this morning that I was coming," he said, ignoring her comment on his appearance. "You're not looking first-rate yourself, Decie," he added, for the sudden flush of excitement had left her face, and its pallor was perceptible.

"I'm all right, Bobby," she said. "But, tell me, is anything the matter?"

He looked down at the ground and began to roll a cigarette, and she could see that his hands were shaking.

"There is something the matter, Decie," he said. "You've got to know sooner or later; it can't be kept from you, and you'd better hear it from me than any one else—we're in trouble, Decie!"

Trouble! Her lips formed the word; then her woman's courage came to her aid.

"Tell me all—everything, Bobby!" she said. "Whatever it is, we must bear it and meet it!"

He lit his cigarette, but it went out again, and he flung it from him with a nervous gesture.

"It was Mr. Mershon wired for me," he said.

"Mr. Mershon! Why should he telegraph to you?"

"Because he thought I ought to know—that I ought to be here. He was quite right, of course. He met me at the station and told me all about it."

"All about it! about what? Is it—is it anything to do with this business—this company—of father's?"

Bobby nodded gloomily.

"Yes," he said; "that's it. The affair has come to smash."

Decima drew a long breath.

"To utter smash!" he said. "I don't understand it all, even now, though Mershon tried to explain. There was something wrong in the invention—the patent wouldn't hold water—I don't quite know what it was. Mershon tried not to put the blame on the governor, but he let it out reluctantly."

Decima sat pale and silent for a moment; then she murmured:

"Why did he join Mr. Mershon?"

"Honestly, I don't think Mershon's to blame," said Bobby. "He was led away by the governor's enthusiasm. Who wouldn't be? You know the way he talks. I don't think Mershon's such a bad fellow, after all. He—he is behaving very well about it. He has lost a lot of money in the affair."

"I am sorry!" said Decima; "very, very sorry! But Mr. Mershon is a rich man, and it will not matter to him. But it will matter very much to poor father—for we are not rich, are we, Bobby? But, never mind"—she forced a smile—"we will meet it as best we can; we shall have to economize. You will only be able to smoke half as many cigarettes, Bobby."

She crept closer to him, and laid her head upon his shoulder. It was the only word of reproach she would utter.

Bobby looked down at her remorsefully, and then away suddenly, as if he could not bear the sight of her brave smile, which touched him more than tears would have done.

"We shall have to leave the Woodbines, I suppose?" she said. She stifled a sigh. "Well, never mind; we can go into one of the new little cottages, and live very quietly and plainly—"

Bobby's face worked, and his lips parted, as if he were about to speak; but his courage failed him, and he got up quickly, his face averted from her.

"I'll—I'll go and change," he said. "We—we will talk about it after dinner."

He hurried out of the room.

Decima sat where he had left her, her hands clasped in her lap. Although she had not been altogether unprepared, the blow had fallen heavily.

Presently she heard steps coming toward the door, and she thought it was Bobby returning, but the door opened, and Mr. Mershon's voice said :

"I beg your pardon, is your brother here?"

Decima arose and moved away slightly.

"He has just gone," she said.

Mershon came into the room, and stood looking at her.

"I see he has told you, Miss Decima?" he said.

"Yes," said Decima, with her back turned almost to him. "He has told me, and I am very sorry! I am sorry that you should lose so much money through my father's fault."

He drew a little nearer.

"There's no occasion to be sorry on my account," he said. "I sha'n't miss it. I'm sorry, too—for your father."

Decima sighed.

"We must bear it," she said. "I have just been telling Bobby that we must leave the Woodbines and live very plainly, like—like poor people—which I suppose we shall be. There is nothing very hard in that."

He looked at her with a curious expression.

"And—and perhaps, if we are very careful," she went on, in a low voice, "we may be able to pay you back some of the money you have lost through us—I don't know how much it is."

Mershon suppressed a smile.

"I'm afraid your brother hasn't told you all," he said.

"Yes," said Decima; "he has told me all. He is bearing it bravely! Poor Bobby! It will be a struggle for him; for he will have to manage with a very small allowance, I'm afraid. But it will be all right when he gets into the army; for he is so clever that he is sure to get on."

"It is evident that he hasn't told you all," said Mershon. "I'm afraid, Miss Decima, that the case is worse than you guess. I didn't know how bad it was myself until I'd had a talk with your father and brother together."

Decima looked at him with slowly growing apprehension.

"What do you mean?" she said, faintly. "How can it be worse?"

"Well," he said, with a slight shrug of his shoulders,

"you talk about paying me back, and your brother going into the army, but I'm afraid there's little chance of either event coming off—not that I want to be paid back, or should take the money. The fact is, Miss Decima, your father has been going in for this thing neck or nothing—what we call in the city, lose all or win all. It appears—mind! I didn't know it, or I should strongly have advised him against such foolhardiness—that he has put every penny he possessed into this confounded thing. And, of course, he has lost it. In fact, I'm afraid he has made himself liable for more than he has got. He says he is utterly ruined!"

Decima stared at him with wide eyes; her lips quivered, but no sound came.

Mershon went and closed the door with his foot; then he came near to her—as near as he dared.

"Look here, Miss Decima," he said. "It's best to face these things straight out, and so I've told you the absolute truth. Your father's ruined, and your brother will have to give up all idea of the army, and take his chances in the colonies—and a deuced poor chance it is, I'm afraid! That is, unless——"

He paused and looked at her, and then down at the ground, for the terror in her eyes and white face daunted even him for a moment.

"Unless," he went on. "Well, it all rests with you!"  
"With me?"

Her lips formed the words; they were scarcely audible.

"Yes, with you!" he said. "Miss Decima, I'm a straight man. We have to speak out straight in the city—and I won't treat you as a child, but as a girl—a woman upon whom her father's and brother's happiness and welfare depend. This trouble's about as big as it can be. They must go under with it, unless you care to save them!"

"I—I save them!" said Decima.

He jerked his head.

"Yes! You remember what I said to you the other night at the Leafmore ball. I told you I loved you, and I asked you to be my wife. You said 'No!' then, but now I repeat my proposal. If you will say 'Yes,' I will take this trouble off your hands. I will find the money your

father's lost ; I will double your brother's allowance—and pay his debts——”

“ His debts ! ” breathed Decima.

Mershon laughed shortly.

“ Oh, yes ; there are debts ! He has been going the pace ! I'll do more than this—I'll keep an eye on your father for the future, and look after him. And I'll make a settlement on you as large as you like.”

In his eagerness he had taken a step or two nearer. Decima drew back until she leaned against the window. Her brain was whirling ; she felt as if she were suffocating, and her eyes were fixed on his shrewd, sharp face as if she were under a spell.

“ Come ! ” he said. “ I've made the offer bluntly, because it's business ; but I could put it in another way. I love you, Decima—love you with all my heart and soul. I want you more than I've wanted anything before in my life. If you'd said ‘ Yes ’ to me the other night, you'd never have heard anything of this trouble—I'd have paid up every penny, and said not a syllable about it. That's my way. But you said ‘ No ! ’ and I'm obliged to tell you, and make a bargain with you. You close with my offer, and I'll never refer to it again. No one need know anything about it—not even your brother—for I can tell him that things have turned out better than we expected. It will be easy to bamboozle him, for he knows as little of business as do the rest of you—Do you mind me smoking, for I'm a little upset ? I see your brother's had a cigarette——”

He lit a cigar, and his hand shook as Bobby's had done, but with a different emotion. Decima put up a shaking hand and brushed the soft hair from her forehead. No bird in the fowler's net was more helpless than she was at that moment. As Mershon had said to his sister, he had got her tightly. Her father ruined ; Bobby's future absolutely blasted. And by a word, a word of three letters, she could save them.

She thought of her father, broken-hearted by his failure, cooped up in a laborer's cottage, deprived of his workshop, of all his dreams ; she thought of Bobby, the bright boy, with his shattered hopes, starving in the colonies, and a shudder swept over her.

She could save him by the one word, "Yes."

At that moment—why, she knew not—she thought of Lord Gaunt. If he were only here to help her, advise her! But he was not here; he might be thousands of miles away. She was alone and helpless.

Mershon eyed her covertly. He knew that she was struggling; but he knew that there was no loophole in the net he had drawn round her.

"What do you say?" he said at last.

Decima seemed to wake as if from a dream, and turned her eyes upon him with a half-dazed, half-appealing gaze.

"Why do you hesitate?" he said. "Give me your answer. Say 'Yes,' Decima, and I'll go straight in and tell your father and brother that they needn't worry themselves any more about this miserable business. Your father can go on playing at making his fortune by inventions, and your brother can go into the army and be a general in time. Only say the word, and leave the rest to me." There was silence in the room, broken only by the faint croak of the jackdaw as he preened his feathers. The slim, girlish figure, with its white face and dark-rimmed eyes, leaned by the window. Her heart was like lead, and beat slowly and heavily, as if it were imprisoned by a hand of ice.

To save them, the dear ones!

"Well!" he said, "what is your answer?"

Her hands clenched at her side, the martyr's look came into her eyes.

"I must! I must!" she breathed. "Yes."

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### CHAPTER XIII.

As Decima hesitatingly pronounced the word "Yes," Mershon took a step toward her with outstretched arms; but he noticed a repellent look in her face as she shrank from him. The color died from his cheek and his arms fell to his side irresolutely. He could see that she was not yet prepared to welcome lover-like familiarities.

As the days passed, and their intercourse became more frequent, her studied reserve curbed his passionate de-

sire, and he was forced to forego the privileges of an engaged man.

When Bobby heard of Decima's engagement he was amazed, but not at all displeased. He believed Mershon to be both honorable and generous, and inferred that the courtship had developed and progressed during his absence in London. He questioned his sister about it, and to his pointed inquiry she replied that she had willingly become Mershon's plighted bride.

A few more days elapsed, and then Mershon announced to Decima that he had business which demanded his presence in Italy, in regard to the construction of water-works in one of the Italian cities. He proposed an early marriage, so that he could take her with him to Rome, and thus combine business with pleasure on their matrimonial trip. For a long time she opposed this scheme, but at length his persistence won a reluctant assent. She thought of her father, of Bobby. What did it matter what happened to her, if they were safe and secure?

Mrs. Sherborne, who had learned to love Decima, saw that she was not as happy as a prospective bride should be, and inferred from a conversation with her that something was wrong—in fact, that she did not love the man she was about to marry.

"If you do not love Theodore," Mrs. Sherborne said, "better draw back now. He is all very well when things are going as he wants them,; but when thwarted he is a devil incarnate. My poor child, the discovery that his wedded wife did not love him would enrage him to that extent he would make life a hell for you!"

Decima listened in silence gasping for breath. She thought of her father's plight, of Bobby's troubles, and determined to sacrifice herself for their sake.

"Child!" exclaimed Mrs. Sherborne, "there is yet time to draw back. Do so at any cost, before it is too late! Better be lying out there in the churchyard, better be wandering homeless in the streets, than marry a man you do not love!"

Decima was pale to the lips, and in her eyes there gleamed a look of horror. Yet she managed to say, with a gasp after each word:

"It is too late! I have given my word. I must do it. I cannot draw back!"

That night proved a sleepless one to Decima. She knew not how to act—whether to keep her engagement or break it.

The next morning she resolved to go to London, to visit her aunt, Lady Pauline. She would be guided by her advice. She did not inform Mr. Mershon of her intention, for she feared he would insist upon accompanying her.

To her dismay, when she arrived at Lady Pauline's residence, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, she learned from a servant that her aunt was not at home—that she had gone to Walfield on the previous day.

This was a great disappointment to Decima, and for a few moments she was in a state of deep perplexity. Then she thought of Bobby, who some days before had returned to the metropolis.

"My brother is in London," she said to the servant. "He is living at Prince's Mansions. I will go straight to him; he will bring me back here to-night. Where is Prince's Mansions?"

The servant said she did not know, but that any cabman would find it; and eventually Decima found herself in a hansom, rattling toward the rooms Lord Gaunt had lent Bobby.

A page opened the door to her, and gazed at her, after the manner of his kind, when she inquired for Mr. Deane.

"I don't know whether he's in, miss," he said, "but I'll step up and see."

"I will come, too," said Decima. "I am his sister."

The page opened the outer door of Gaunt's flat, and Decima followed him though the hall into the drawing or sitting-room.

A fire was burning in the grate; there was an odor of cigarettes. The page looked around.

"Mr. Deane ain't here, miss; but I expect he'll be here directly."

"Very well," said Decima. "I will wait."

She sat down in a chair beside the fire and looked round the room. It was beautifully warm, and its luxury and air of taste and refinement struck upon her gratefully.

She noticed the exquisite pictures, the rare bronzes, the fur rugs of leopard and bear skins. Then she remembered that the room was Lord Gaunt's : that he had lived there ; and a strange feeling stole over her.

Presently there came a soft knock at the door, and a maid—a neatly-dressed London maid, in black alpaea with a white cap, and long strings—entered with some tea things.

"Wouldn't you like to take your things off, miss ?" she said, respectfully, "and I have brought you some tea."

Decima assented gratefully, and the maid led her into Bobby's bedroom—that is to say, Lord Gaunt's. Decima looked round with a curious feeling as the maid helped her to remove her outdoor things and went for some hot water.

There was an odor of cigarettes in this room, also. A dress suit of Bobby's lay folded on a chair ; a peculiar perfume arose from it—it struck Decima unpleasantly. A copy of a sporting paper was on a chair beside the bed, as if Bobby had thrown it down just before going to sleep. There were etchings on the wall, delicate, delightful bits of art, which reminded her of Lord Gaunt, as Bobby's clothes and the cigarette fumes and the sporting paper had reminded her of Bobby.

She washed her hands and face, and brushed the soft, wavy hair, and went back to the sitting-room. The maid had placed the tea-service on a little table in front of the fire ; and Decima poured herself out a cup, looking round the room, musingly and with intense interest.

It seemed to her eloquent of Lord Gaunt. Her mind dwelt upon him. He had lived in this room ; had sat in this very chair, perhaps ; had drunk out of this very cup. Where was he now ? she wondered.

She sighed and leaned back. If he had only been here ! She could have told him of her trouble. He could have helped her ; advised her. Now, for the first time, her heart ached with a yearning for his presence.

She rose, and went round the room, looking at the various articles upon the tables and cabinets. There was a strange mixture—a carving in ivory, a bronze medallion ; an illuminated missal lay beside a well-used Persian pipe. Upon the walls hung swords and spears—not the orna-

ments you buy in Wardour Street, but weapons which had been used, and still bore stains of blood. She touched one with her finger and shuddered.

Yes, the room was eloquent of him. She got round to the mantel at last. It, too, was crowded with bric-à-brac; but one thing among them attracted and chained her attention—it was the portrait—a cabinet photograph—of a woman's face and bust. It was a beautiful face; more than beautiful—fascinating. A dark face, of perfect oval, with dark eyes, which smiled witchingly, fascinatingly, as did the small full lips. She wore a low-necked dress—very low—and the white neck and bust shone snow-like against the dark hair and eyes.

Decima looked at it, and, as she looked, a strange repulsion took possession of her.

The face was beautiful, fascinating; but to Decima the beauty was repellent, the witchery unholy. The face jarred upon her, and yet she could not take her eyes from it. It was enclosed in a costly silver frame. She took it in her hand, and studied the face—her brows drawn straight.

Who was it? Some friend of Bobby's—or Lord Gaunt's?

While the photograph was in her hand she heard the hall door open, and she raised her head listening expectantly. Steps came along the hall, a hand turned the handle of the door.

“Bobby!” she almost exclaimed aloud, and she put the photograph hurriedly, face downward, upon the mantel, and went to meet him with a smile on her face.

The door opened, and a tall figure in a fur coat entered. It was too tall for Bobby, but for a moment she did not recognize him; then, as he turned from closing the door and presented his face to her, she saw that it was Lord Gaunt!

She shrank back, her outstretched arms falling to her side. He looked at her, stopped short, then, exclaiming: “Good God, Decima!” came toward her.

## CHAPTER XIV.

“DECIMA!”

He stood stockstill and gazed at her as if she were a ghost, a vision called up by his longing desire for her. He was thin, and his face looked worn and haggard and white against the dark thick fur of his coat; and there was an expression almost of dread in his eyes as they dwelt on her face.

He had been in Scotland, far in Sutherlandshire, quite alone, wandering in the wilds, going through the pretence of fishing, shooting, fighting against the mad love which consumed him, as men fight vainly against the flames which spring up afresh against the beating hands. And at last he had acknowledged himself beaten, had resolved to leave England forever. He would go without a word of farewell—as he had often gone before—and leave no trace behind him.

He had booked his passage, the vessel sailed on the morrow; and he had come to his rooms to get his gun and other weapons necessary for the killing of the big game which he hoped and prayed would divert his mind and help him to kill the memory of his girl-love.

He should never see her again! And now, here she stood before him—within reach of his hand—unless she were indeed only a wraith of herself, a vision, a ghost!

His breath—it had seemed to cease—came again quickly, but he could not speak, though his lips formed her name again.

The blood had rushed to Decima’s face, something warm seemed to run through her veins, a swift, sudden joy leaped in her heart.

“Lord Gaunt! Is it really you?” she said, at last.

And her voice rang like soft music in his ears. It was the sound he had been thirsting for all these weary, weary weeks. How often, in fancy, had he heard it in the great solitude among the mountains!

“Yes, it is I!” he responded, as if to assure himself that he was awake and not dreaming. “What—why are you here?”

He did not offer to shake hands—did not move toward her, but still stood gazing at her. And she, for her part, stood still also, her hand resting on the back of the chair.

“I—I came to see Bobby,” she said.

He looked round.

“He is not here?”

“No,” she said. “He is out; he is coming back presently, they say. Where have you come from; does he expect you?”

“No,” he said. “I have come from Scotland—from Sutherlandshire.”

Mechanically, slowly, like a man in a dream, he took off his huge fur coat and dropped it on the couch, and came toward the fire.

Decima looked at him, and saw more plainly as the firelight played on his face, how worn and haggard he looked.

“Have—have you been ill?” she asked, timidly.

“Ill? No!” he replied.

He raised his head and glanced at her. He scarcely dared to look long at her lest the desire to take her in his arms should get the better of him.

“And—and you? You look—you are thinner, paler. Have you been ill?”

“No,” she said simply. “I am quite well. What have you been doing all—all this time?”

“Fishing, shooting,” he said. “‘All this time.’ Does it seem so long?”

“Yes, very long,” she replied, with the ghost of a sigh, as she looked at the fire. “How long is it? I—I scarcely remember. Why—why did you go so suddenly, Lord Gaunt?”

He caught his breath to keep back the words, “because I loved you. Because I should have gone mad if I had stayed!” Then he said aloud, with a low, strained laugh:

“I wanted a change.”

Decima nodded.

“And have you enjoyed it?”

“Very much!” he said with bitter irony.

There was silence for a moment. The antique clock,

with its figures of relentless Time mowing down the minutes with his scythe, ticked mockingly.

"And—and what is the news from Leafmore? Is your father well?"

"Yes," she said.

"And—and Bright, and the rest?"

He put the commonplace question in a dull, mechanical fashion.

"Yes," she said again. Then she glanced at him. "It has gone on as if—as if you had been there. The schools are nearly finished. They look very pretty, and—and—But you will see them, will you not?"

"I don't know," he said, absently.

He was listening to her voice rather than to her words—drinking it in. He was trying to realize that she was here, close by him, alone—alone!—with him.

"My—my movements are rather uncertain."

"Have you only just come from Scotland?" she asked, glancing at the fur coat—at his tired face.

"Yes," he said; "this moment."

"You must be tired! Will you let me give you some tea?" She laughed softly, timidly. "That sounds strange—asking you in your own house! Shall I—may I ring for some more water?"

"No, no," he said, quickly. He did not want the maid—any one—to come in; did not want any other voice than hers in the rooms. "That will do."

"It is quite hot still," she said. She poured out a cup of tea, and carried it to him; he had not moved or offered to go to the table. He took it from her with a slight inclination of the head, and his hand, in transferring the cup, just touched hers. He stood holding the cup, as if he had forgotten it.

"Won't you sit down?" she said. "I have got your chair. Will you not come into it? You see I am forgetting that this is your room and your chair."

He shook his head, and drew a chair forward, quite close to the fire and signed to her to take the big one. She sat down, her hands resting in her lap, her eyes fixed on the blaze as it rose and fell fitfully, one moment lighting up their faces, the next casting them into shadow.

Gradually the wan look was leaving his face, a light

began to dawn in his eyes. Her presence, her nearness, was having its effect upon him. He could hear her even breathing, could feel, though he did not look at her, the eyes he loved so passionately glancing at him now and again. She was here—here by his side, his dear, sweet girl love. He forgot all else. The silence did not seem irksome, or embarrassing; it was as if his thoughts spoke, and no lip language were necessary. But at last he said :

“ And so all is going on well at Leafmore ? ”

“ Yes,” she said, with a slight start. Upon her, too, a kind of peace—a lull in the storm—had fallen. “ Yes ; Mr. Bright has been working very hard——”

“ Which means that you have also ! ” he said in a low voice.

“ And a very great deal has been done. You will be surprised at the change, at the improvement ! Mr. Bright says that it will be the model village—the example for the rest of England. He is very proud of it and the people—ah, you should hear what they say ! It would make you very happy, Lord Gaunt ! ”

“ Would it ? ” he said, slowly. “ And you—are you happy—content ? ”

She winced slightly, as one winces when a hand touches, though gently, a wound forgotten for the moment.

“ I am quite content,” she said, ignoring the “ happy.” “ Why, have you not done all I—Mr. Bright and the people wanted ? Yes, quite content and satisfied.”

“ Then I am also,” he said, gravely.

“ Will you have some more tea ? ” she asked. “ And will you not eat something—some bread and butter ? ”

“ Only some tea, please,” he said. She filled his cup again, and he took it, looking at her as he did so. Was it fancy on his part, or had her lovely face grown less pale, the eyes less sad ? ”

She leaned back and glanced up at the clock.

“ Bobby has not come yet,” she said, reflectingly. “ I wonder how long ? ”—Then, as if it had suddenly occurred to her, “ Oh, Lord Gaunt, had I not better go ? I—I must be in your way ! ” She said it quite frankly, and her eyes

sought his face innocently, as one man's might seek another's, and she rose.

He put out his hand and almost touched her.

"No, no!" he said. "Do not go. Stay! Bobby will be here directly, no doubt. How long have you been in London?" He went on as if by talking he could keep her.

"Only this afternoon," she said. "I have only just come up. I came up suddenly, unexpectedly." Her voice faltered, and her face grew grave. She remembered—it came upon her like a flash—the reason for the journey; and the remembrance clouded over her unconscious joy in his presence. "I found that Aunt Pauline was not in London—she is at her country house—and I came on here to spend the evening with Bobby. I am going to Aunt Pauline's to sleep."

"I see," he said. "Why did you come up so suddenly?"

She was silent a moment. Why could she not tell him? And yet she could not.

"I wanted to see her," she said, in a low voice.

"Is—is anything the matter?" he asked, noting her sudden gravity, the cloud on her face.

"Yes," she said. "At least something has been the matter. We—father—has been in great trouble—"

"Trouble!" he repeated, intently. "What trouble?" She sighed.

"He has lost a great deal of money, and at first we thought, we feared, that—But it does not matter, now." Her voice was very still and subdued. "It is all over now—all put straight."

"Why did you not tell me?" he began almost fiercely.

Then he stopped as she looked at him with faint surprise.

"I would have told you," she said, simply, not reproachfully. "But I did not know where you were—no one knew."

"No; that is true! Forgive me," he said, almost inaudibly.

She had been in trouble and in need of him, and had not been able to come to him. What a brute he had been!

"And you would have come to me?" he said, rather huskily.

"Yes," she said, simply, but a little timidly. "There was no one else; and—and you are always so kind. You would have told me what to do, advised me, would you not?"

"Yes," he said, still more huskily. "I would—God knows how gladly!"

"Thank you," she said, and the sweetness of her voice hurt him. "But it does not matter now. It is all over."

"I am glad," he said; "and yet sorry that—that I hadn't a hand in getting rid of the trouble. Are you sure that it is past—done with?"

"Yes, quite," she said, in the same still voice.

She put her hand up before her face, as if the fire were burning it. He rose, and took a Japanese screen from the mantelshelf—his hand touched the portrait lying face downward—and gave it to her. And with a murmured thanks she took it and screened her face.

"How did your father come to lose this money?" asked Gaunt.

Decima turned her face as if her thoughts had been wandering from the subject.

"I don't quite know. It was through some speculation, something to do with one of his inventions. Mr. Mershon and he started a company, I think—"

"Mershon!" Gaunt started, and looked at her earnestly. "Was he in it? How did he—ah, I remember! And your father lost his money? I can well believe it! I don't know much of Mr. Mershon, but I should say—"

"Oh, hush! she broke in, looking up at him as if she dreaded the next words. "You—you must not say—I must not listen to—to anything against him!"

Gaunt stopped and stared at her with a frown.

"Why not?" he said—demanded, rather.

The color rose to her face, then left it pale again. She raised her eyes to his with a world of sad resignation in them.

"I am going to be his wife," she said, in a low voice.

Gaunt did not move for a moment, but sat like one suddenly turned to stone. Then his face broke up, as it were and he rose and stood before her.

"Going—to—be—his wife?" he repeated, hoarsely. His own voice sounded like a muffled bell, the room spun round with him. His love for her, his jealousy, rose about him like a great wave of fire, and swept over him, scorching him as it passed. "You are going to marry him?"

She looked up at him with a faint wonder in her sad eyes.

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly: for his face, his voice, frightened her.

He turned from her and walked to the end of the room. Then he came back and stood over her, a tall figure, almost threatening in its aspect.

"Do—do you love him?"

She was silent, and his face grew darker, fiercer. "Answer me! You can answer me! Yes or no!"

She rose, drawn to her feet by the stress of his emotion, and her answering to it.

"No!" her lips formed.

He drew a long breath.

"Then—then why—"

He stopped as if the words choked him.

She stood downcast and trembling.

"He—he helped us. We should have been penniless. Bobby"—

He saw it all in an instant.

"My God!" broke forth from his strained lips. "Child!" —he caught her arm in an iron grip—"do you know—realize—what it is you are doing? Marry Mershon! You!"

His grasp hurt her, but she made no attempt to release her arm as she looked up at him pitifully and with faint surprise.

"Why—why are you so angry with me?" she faltered. "How could I help it? He said that if—if I married him he would pay this money, and—and help Bobby. And—and I said 'Yes,' at last. I could not have taken this money from him without—he would not have given it. And—and it does not matter what becomes of me so that they are safe and—and happy—"

His grasp tightened, and she winced; but he was all unconscious of the pain he was inflicting. His own agony was too great. The thought that she was to be the wife

of another man—and that man Mershon!—was rending his heart in twain; every nerve was stretched and strained on a rack. And her admission that she did not love the man increased the torture.

She looked up at him, at his set face and gleaming eyes, with a questioning terror.

"Why—why are you so angry—why do you care so?" she faltered.

A shudder ran through him, and the set rigidity of his face relaxed, melted, so to speak.

"Good heavens, child, don't you know?" he said, hoarsely.

In her innocence she drew a little nearer to him.

"Is it because you—you like me, because we have been such friends, that you are so sorry for me?" she said. "Perhaps"—She stopped and smiled—a woeful little smile.

"Go on! Speak from your heart; hide nothing from me!" he commanded, insisted, hoarsely.

"Perhaps if I had come to you, and—and told you of our trouble you would have married me," she said, simply. "I—I think you like me, Lord Gaunt. And I could not have taken the money—unless I had been your wife, could I?"

A groan broke from his white lips. Fate was too powerful for him. He had fled from Temptation but Temptation is fleet of foot, and it had overtaken him, and had got him under its heel.

"Child!" he said in a low, thick voice. "Don't you know? Haven't you seen? Can you not guess? I love you!"

She shrank—for even in him passion startled and awed her.

"You love—"

"I love you!" His voice broke on hers fiercely. "I—love you, Decima! I have loved you from the beginning! No man ever loved any woman as I love you! You are the life of my life, the soul of my soul! Every thought is of you! You hold my heart in the hollow of your hands! It was because I loved you, passionately, madly, that I left you, fled from you!" He stopped for breath, and caught her other hand and gripped it fast, as if he feared she would be torn from him there and then.

## CHAPTER XV.

DECIMA stood quite still. She did not shrink from him; she was too overwhelmed by the storm of his passion to realize the meaning of his words. Then, slowly, it came crushing down upon her, caught her as if in an embrace, enveloped her like a sun-warmed cloud. Her heart leaped, then beat heavily—a joy beyond the power of poor mortal words to him, suffused her.

All in an instant a veil seemed to have been torn asunder and she saw and knew what love means, and that her love, with all it meant, had been given to him long, long ago. The pain of his grasp became an ecstasy. She could have laughed aloud in a new-born joy, delight. But all she did was to gaze up at him as the devotee gazes upward at his god—the god which had power to deal out misery or joy unspeakable.

"You—love—me!" she said, unconsciously.

Her voice thrilled through him and dispelled the last remnant of honor that clung to him despairingly.

"I love you!" he said. "You are just life to me! Decima, if you had not been as innocent as a child, you would have known it! Think—look back! Do you remember nothing—have you seen nothing? Why was I always with you? Why did I stay at Leafmore? Why did I do all—everything you wanted? Do men act like that unless they are in love? See!" He thrust his hand in his bosom, and dragged out the ribbon which had fallen from her hair. "I have worn this next my heart day and night, sleeping or waking. It has never left me. You had worn it!"

The blood rushed to her face, her eyes glowed with a pure passion, and she drew still nearer to him.

His arm went round her waist, and he crushed her against his heart, and, for the first time—the first time!—his lips sought hers, and kissed her.

She did not shrink, but lay in his embrace, her face upturned flowerlike, to his kisses.

"You are the whole wide world to me!" he said, hoarsely. "Life is not worth having without you! I cannot live without you! I thought I could! I have tried

—but you see, you know—I cannot! Decima, child, my dearest, tell me! Tell me! Do you love me?"

She looked up at him, and the look sent a hot wave over him. Her lips parted but for a moment, no words would come. Then she said in a faint whisper which thrilled him :

"I love you!"

"Decima!"

She hid her face against his heart for a moment, then she raised her eyes to his.

"Yes: I know now! How—how stupid—how ignorant I was! I—I must have loved you all through—from the very first!"

He bent and kissed her hair passionately, yet reverently. Her avowal of love awed him. It was as if he had suddenly penetrated the sanctum sanctorum, the holy of holies, of some shrine. Her innocence cried aloud to him.

But his passion deafened him.

"Decima, since the day we met at Leafnore, I have loved you. Day by day that love has grown until it has become the master passion of my life. I have struggled with and fought against it, but Fate and Circumstances have been too many for me. You know the truth now, and—and I am not sorry!"

"Sorry!" Why should you be?" she said.

And love lent a sweeter music to her voice, so that he paused and listened before replying.

"I am not sorry! For us nothing matters—nothing is of consequence but our love. Nothing, no one, shall separate us, Decima!"

She smiled up at him, and her hand stole to his face with a womanly touch which thrilled him.

"No," she said. Then she started. "But—but Mr. Mershon? I have given my word—my promise!"

Her face grew grave and fearful. Gaunt laughed slowly—a laugh of scorn and defiance.

"A word wrung from you—cozened by an artful scheme!" he said. "What does it amount to? He—he bought, bribed you! Bah! I buy, bribe you! I'll do all he offered." He laughed and pressed her to him. "And I buy with love, love! My child, do you know now what you were about to do? To marry a man you did not love!"

"Yes!" she said. And a shudder shook her, so that she clung tighter to him. "I know now! Oh! how could I?"

"How could you?" he exclaimed, with a desperate, reckless laugh. "But that is all over, finished with, dearest. It is I whom you love! Are you glad, Decima? Tell me!"

She drew a long breath. He was smoothing the tendrils of her soft hair from her forehead, was looking into her eyes with the hungry, craving look of love.

"I am glad!" he said. "And you shall never regret it, dearest—never! While I live I will spend every hour in making you happy. You believe that—you trust me?"

"Yes," she breathed. "But, think! Am I fit to be your wife?"—

The word fell like a bolt from the blue. His wife! His face went white. But she went on, all innocently:

"You—you are so—so far above me. I am only Decima Deane"—

He laughed as he thrust the grawsome specter of his past, of his bonds, away from him.

"You are, yes, Decima Deane—the girl I love—the one woman in the world to me. Oh, my darling, my darling!" His voice broke. "Decima, tell me: Am I awake or dreaming?"

She raised her head from the pillow of his breast, and kissed him on the lips.

"Awake!" she breathed.

He returned the kiss fourfold.

"Listen, dearest!" he said. "To-night we will start for—for—anywhere! It does not matter where—"'

She looked at him with a faint smile at first; then with as faint a questioning.

"Start? Why?"

He met her inquiring eyes; then looked aside.

"We must go away together," he said, hoarsely. "There—there will be some fuss and—and stir. We—will go to—yes, to Egypt, to Cairo!"

"Shall we be married there?" she asked, her innocent eyes on his face.

"Married?" The word echoed on his lips hoarsely. "What—what does it matter?"

The word again reminded him of his bondage, of the fact that he was married already. He thrust the remembrance from him once more. He would not remember it!

"You can trust me, dearest!" he said.

"Trust you?" she repeated after him, with a slight knitting of her brows. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"See here, dearest," he said, his eyes falling before the innocent directness of hers, "there are circumstances—It may be necessary that—Would you come with me? Does it matter—whether we are married or not?"

With all her ignorance and innocence of the world and life's miserable mystery, Decima knew something of the sacredness, the necessity, of the marriage tie.

"I—I don't understand—it is very stupid of me!" she faltered.

He turned white and bit his lip.

"Suppose—I asked you to come with me without being married?" he said, desperately. "Suppose there was some reason why—why—we could not be married like—like other persons? Would you risk—dare all; would you trust me, and—come with me?"

She looked at him with no fear in her eyes—nothing but a faint surprise.

"I would go anywhere with you," she said; "I could not refuse!" She drew a long breath, and smiled up at him. "And why should I not? If we cannot be married, we can be friends—just as we have been at Leafmore. I was very happy there—ah, very happy! And I should see you every day should I not? Perhaps Bobby could go with us? But I suppose not. He could not leave his work, could he, even for a time?"

Before her absolute innocence Gaunt quailed.

He bit his lips and for the first time his eyes fell before her pure gaze.

"Come—come and sit down!" he said, huskily. He drew her to the big chair, but she signed to him to sit, and sinking on to the thick rug at his feet, she leaned her arm on his knee, and her head on her arm. Gaunt stroked her hair with a trembling hand, and stared at the fire. Conscience stung and lashed him, but its sting, its whip, fell upon a heart made insensible by passion. If, he

argued to himself, he did not take her away she would marry Mershon ; he knew the pressure which would be brought to bear, knew that she would not be able to withstand it. She would marry a man she did not love ; and from such a hell, such a life in death, surely Gaunt, the man she loved, ought to snatch her at any cost ! The happiness, the misery of her life hung in the balance.

After all, would the wrong be very great ? He could take her away to some land where she would not be likely to meet any English people ; they could hide themselves under an assumed name ; no breath of shame or reproach should touch her. He would watch over her happiness every hour of his life. And she should be happy.

And—and, perhaps Fate would take pity on them and kill that other woman, his wife ! Then he would marry Decima, and—and all would be well.

One knows what an admirable advocate the devil can be ; and now he was pleading with Gaunt, not only for Gaunt, himself, but for the girl he loved. He could not let her go.

“ Decima,” he said, and his voice sounded so labored that she raised her head and looked at him with some apprehension in her eyes, “ I—I want you to understand. We must go—if we go—alone ; we could not take Bobby with us. Child, the world—everybody—will blame me for taking you.”

“ It would be wrong ! ” she said, thoughtfully.

“ It would be wrong,” he said, as if the admission were wrung from him. “ That is, in the eyes of the world ; but—but I am not so sure—I feel that, even if it be wrong, it would be a greater sin to let you go back to—to—him.”

She shuddered.

“ I could not go back,” she said, gravely. “ Not now, —not now, when I know ”—She paused, then went on, with a sweet abandon—“ that I love you ! ”

He bent his head until his lips touched her hair. Then he rose, and, taking her in his arms, put her in the chair.

“ Let me think ! ” he said. He began to pace the room, and walked to and fro with quick steps. His blood was at fever heat, and something beat at the back of his brain

like the crash of a wave against a rock. Now and again he stopped and aimlessly took up some article from the table and looked at it mechanically. One of the things was a quaint Persian dagger, in an exquisitely enameled sheath. He drew the blade, looked at it without seeing it, then replaced it. As he did so, the thing fell from his fingers. As he picked it up and poised it on the table Decima looked around.

"Why are you so troubled?" she said in a low voice, full of loving sympathy.

He came to her, and kneeling beside her took her hands and pressed them against his heart.

"Decima, you must leave yourself, your fate, in my hands. You must trust to me. If I let you go now, it—it must be forever! I shall never see you again—"

She uttered a faint cry and stooping looked into his face with terror and grief in her eyes, on her lips.

"No, no!" she breathed, "I—I could not bear it!"

"You see!" he said. "And if you could not, how then could I, whose love for you is a thousand times greater than your love for me! Dearest, I must take you with me to-morrow. We will have to say good-by to the past; we will have to begin a new life in a strange place—among strange people. Will you come?"

A great solemnity fell upon her.

"I must come!" she said, and the low, sweet voice thrilled through him. "I must do whatever you ask me. I—I could not let you go away from me, and see you no more. I—I think—I hope I should die if you did."

He almost laughed.

"That settles it!" he said, with a kind of reckless, desperate gayety. "Now, see, dearest, you must go back to Lady Pauline's—it is too late to start to-night. To-morrow morning—at eight o'clock—is that too early?"

She smiled at the triviality of the question. What hour could be too early? what did it matter?

"Well, then, you must leave the house and take a cab to Charing Cross Station."

"To Charing Cross Station?" she repeated, carefully.

"Yes; I will meet you there—I shall be watching for you. And then—well, the rest remains with me!"

She leaned back and looked at him with perfect trust

and confidence, as a woman looks when she has placed her life in the hands of the man she loves.

"And when shall we be married?" she asked. "Will it be soon—or shall we have to wait a long time?"

His face quivered.

"It—it may not be for a long time," he said, trying to speak calmly. "Until then we shall have to live away—away from everybody. You will not even be able to write—"

A troubled, perplexed expression shone in her eyes as they rested on his. She thought, with a pang of pain and remorse, of her father.

"Why? Because it will be wrong to—to go away with you. Yes, I think I understand—"

But he knew that she did not—fully. He was silent a moment, then he said in a constrained voice:

"You do not ask me why I cannot marry you now, Decima?"

"No," she said, "I am waiting until you choose to tell me."

"I will tell you—some day," he said, thickly. "Promise me that—that when I do, you will not turn from me, Decima! Promise me that—that when you know you will still love me—"

"I promise!" she said. "How could I turn from you? How could I cease to love you? I shall always love you while life lasts. I couldn't do otherwise, if I tried—whatever happened. Even if—if you did not love me—"

"Hush!" he broke in, almost solemnly. "That is impossible! If you knew—"

He glanced at the clock.

"I am afraid you must go, dearest," he said. "Heavens! What it costs me to let you go—to part with you even for a few hours!"

She rose, her hands resting on his shoulders, and he kissed her dress as it touched him.

"It will not be for long!" she said, with a happy little sigh. "I shall not sleep, I know. I shall lie awake and try and realize what has happened to me. It still seems like a dream—"

"May you never awake from it, dearest!" he murmured. She laughed softly.

"I wonder where Bobby is? I should like to have seen him—to have told him—but I am not to tell him! I forgot!"

"No," he said. "You must tell no one!"

"My things are in his room," she said. "I will go and get them—"

As she spoke she looked up and down the mantel as if she were searching for something.

"I put a long pin—a hatpin there," she said.

Mechanically he searched also, pushing aside the curios and ornaments. In doing so he took up the portrait, lying face downward, and was putting it down again when, as mechanically he glanced at it.

He did not start, uttered no cry, but he stood stock still and stared at the bewitching face in the silver frame as if he had suddenly fallen under a spell. Gradually a deadly pallor spread over his face, his eyes became distended.

"Who—what!" broke from his set lips.

Decima had found the pin, and had turned to leave the room. She came back to him and looked over his shoulder.

"That portrait? Whose is it?" she asked.

She had not seen his face.

His senses seemed to be deserting him; he could not remove his eyes from the face which, with its "beauty of the devil," seemed to smile up at him mockingly, derisively. His silence smote her, and she looked at him. A low cry broke from her lips.

"What—what is the matter?" she murmured. "What—is it? I—I found it—saw it. Whose portrait is it?"

Though he tried to crush the answer down, it would come, as if he had lost control of his voice.

"It is my wife!" he said, as a man speaks in his sleep.

She shrank back from him as if he had struck her.

"Your—wife?"

The words were scarcely audible, and yet to him they seemed to ring through the room.

He still gazed at the face. How had it come there? What juggling fiend had conjured the thing up to confront him with it at this moment—the moment of his life?

"Your—wife?" Decima repeated.

And she shrank a step farther away from him.

"My wife!" he said, hoarsely, still staring at it.

Then he lifted his eyes heavily, slowly and looked at her—looked and realized that he had spoken aloud—that he had told her.

With an oath, he flung the picture into the fireplace. It fell with a crash as the glass and frame were shattered on the tiles; then he stretched out his hands toward her.

"Yes, my wife! Deeima, you know now why I cannot marry you! I am married already!"

"No, no!" She put up her hands to her ears as if to shut out the words.

"It is true!" he said, hoarsely, with a calm more terrible than any violence. "I am married to—that woman whose portrait lies there. That is why I cannot marry you. Listen—for God's sake, don't shrink from me!" for as he had taken a step toward her, she had drawn back with a gesture of denial.

"Your wife! Then—then it is not I whom you love—you cannot! It is she!"

"Love her!" He laughed with fierce bitterness. "You don't know what you say! Love! I hate—loathe her!"

A cry broke from her lips.

"But she is your wife!"

He made a gesture of despair. How could he tell her—make her understand?

"Decima, she is my wife, but I hate her! No man with a spark of manhood could do otherwise. Child, listen—don't shrink from me! Don't—don't look so, or I shall go mad! She is a bad, worthless woman—I left her—I have not seen her for years; she is nothing to me—nothing, nothing! Don't you understand? But that she is my wife, I should have told you of my love long, long ago. Ah, that you understand! Come to me! Child, have pity!"

He knelt to her, and drew her hands from her face. She yielded, or, rather, she did not resist, but her eyes were fixed vacantly above his head, as if she were trying to understand—and to bear—the truth.

"Decima, now that you know, you will not turn from me——"

"Your wife!" She drew one hand from his grasp and pressed it against her forehead with a piteous little gesture of helplessness and despair. "Oh, why—why did you not tell me? Your wife!"

"My God, don't—don't repeat it!" he cried. "Try—try and forget it! Decima, you—you will not desert me; you will not draw back! I cannot live without you! If you turn from me——"

He rose and caught her in his arms, for she had swayed to and fro, as if she were about to fall. But his touch seemed to give her strength to resist him, and after a moment—a moment during which he looked into her eyes—she recovered from the terrible faintness and drew herself from his arms.

"Let—let me go—ah, let me go!" she panted. "I will go! I want to go! Your wife!"

"You shall not go until you have heard me," he said, fiercely. "Child, you don't understand, or you would not torture me. Sit down!"

"No, no!"

"Ah! but you must! You must listen! Decima!"

She stood, her hands clasped tightly, her face upraised, her eyes fixed on vacancy, and her despair almost drove him mad.

"Decima," he began again; then suddenly he stopped. There was a sound in the corridor. A voice—a woman's voice—said in clear, metallic tones:

"Thanks, don't trouble! I know the way. I will go in and wait until he comes in."

At the sound of the voice Gaunt started and looked over his shoulder as if his senses were playing some fiendish trick on him. Decima heard the voice, the words, but she did not move.

"God! It is she!" broke from his white lips.

He caught Decima's arm, but stood as if paralyzed for a moment, then he said, in a hoarse whisper:

"Go—that room!" and, dashing open the door, half led, half dragged her into the adjoining room. Then he closed the door, and stood with his back to it and—waited!

## CHAPTER XVI.

IT was a long arm of coincidence, guided by Morgan Thorpe's cunning, which had led Laura to Prince's Mansions that night of all nights.

Three days before there had been a little dinner at Cardigan Terrace. It was like all the other dinners, perfect of menu and cozy in character, and as usual Trevor and Bobby were the only guests.

Now, Bobby had come back from Leafmore with a good resolution. He would see no more of Morgan Thorpe and Laura, for, alas! it was as "Laura" he habitually thought of her, and not seldom addressed her; so far had poor Bobby gone! Bobby made this resolve firmly, and he meant to stick to it. But the morning after his resolve, lo and behold, Mr. Morgan Thorpe, arrayed in faultless attire, entered Gaunt's rooms and greeted Bobby as if he were a long lost brother suddenly returned.

"My dear boy!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been? I called the other night, and was filled with alarm when they told me that you had left London. I feared that you had fled from us for good." Which, though he did not intend it, was a particularly accurate way of putting it. "I was quite cut up, I assure you, and as to Laura"—he paused and smiled at Bobby—"well, perhaps I'd better not say how my news affected her. Mustn't tell tales out of school, eh, Deane?"

He leaned forward and touched Bobby on the knee, and Bobby grew red and hot.

"I—I had a wire from home and had to run down suddenly."

Morgan Thorpe glanced at him sharply.

"No bad news, I trust?" he said.

"No!" replied Bobby, after a moment's hesitation. "At least—well, something had gone wrong—some business; but it's all right now."

"I'm glad to hear it! I was afraid one of your people was ill," said Mr. Morgan Thorpe with charming sympathy. "And I'm glad you are back. We missed you, my dear Deane, though you were away for so short a

time. Trevor came and dined with us; but— Well, Trevor is a deuced good fellow, but he didn't compensate us for your absence. I never saw Laura so triste and dull! You really must come round soon! What do you say to dining with us to-morrow night?"

Bobby's good resolution rose and looked at him sternly, and still more red and uncomfortable, he stammered an excuse.

"Engaged! I'm sorry, and I'm sure Laura will be. Well, we'll hope for another night."

Bobby then declared that for the future he had decided to renounce card playing; and Morgan Thorpe, with shrewd tact commended him for his resolution and said that Laura had urged him to use his influence to that end.

The young man was grateful for this mark of friendship on the part of Laura, and his regard for her was enhanced.

"To Laura that will be the best news that I can bring to her—that you have decided to cut card playing," remarked Thorpe. "But you'll come and see her, won't you?"

"Yes," said Bobby, stifling a sigh as his good resolution went up the chimney with a moan of reproach and farewell.

"That's all right. So long!"

Mr. Morgan Thorpe paused at the door and looked around.

"Delightful rooms these of yours! Always strike me whenever I come into them. Lord—what is his name?—still at that place in the country?"

"No," said Bobby. "He has gone."

Morgan Thorpe stopped, with his hand on the handle of the door.

"Gone, eh? Where? Gone for good?"

Bobby shook his head rather sadly. "I don't know. He left Leafmore suddenly, and no one knows his whereabouts. I'm half inclined to think he has gone to Africa."

"To Africa?" A faint expression of relief shot for a moment into Morgan Thorpe's frank blue eyes. "Really! Well, he might go to a worse place. He'll escape the coming winter."

With another nod and smile, he took his departure.

The expression of relief grew more open as he walked away. For Mr. Morgan Thorpe had had an anxious time of it while in London. He had bargained with Gaunt to keep his wife out of England ; but Morgan Thorpe, while making the bargain, had forgotten that his sister possessed that extremely inconvenient thing—a will of her own.

And the divine Laura had not only declined to remain at Vevey or remove to Paris, but had insisted upon going to London. He had not dared to oppose her, for she would have grown suspicious. And when the divine Laura was suspicious— Well, Morgan Thorpe's life was not an easy one.

So he had been obliged to let her come, and had spent some part of his days in fear and trembling lest he should run up against Gaunt, and so, in a moment, lose his annuity.

But chance had favored him hitherto, and Gaunt had not seen Laura.

“Gone to Africa ?” he mused, as he walked clubwards, with his pleasant smile on his pleasant, open face, as he smoked a choice Havana. “Well, he may have gone, and my luck may still be with me ; but, on the other hand, he may not and may turn up at any moment. My dear Laura, you will have to clear out! Yes, I shall have to move you! But how ?” He pondered for a time ; then he smiled. “If we are going we may as well make a little coup before we start. I'll talk it over with her. Her brain's better than mine at that sort of thing.”

In which Mr. Morgan Thorpe scarcely did himself justice ; for it would have been difficult to find a sharper or more astute scoundrel than himself, even in London, where sharp and astute scoundrels abound and flourish.

Three days afterwards Bobby received a dainty little note, emitting the peculiar scent, from Mrs. Dalton.

Why did he not come to see her ? Had she offended him ? If so, why did he not tell her what she had said or done amiss ? And would he come to dinner on Monday and give her an opportunity of explaining and begging his pardon ?

So ran the note, prettily worded and written in a thin Italian hand.

There was only one answer possible. Bobby wrote,

and said that he would come and tell her that in no way had she offended him, and that she had always been all that was kind and gracious.

And he went. She was alone when he entered the drawing-room, and she received him with a half-sad, half-reproachful air. She was beautifully dressed, and had "made-up" a little pale; her black eyes, which as she had heard his voice outside, had shone with contempt and boredom—now beamed upon him softly, almost tenderly.

"I thought you were never coming, that I—we—should never see you again!" she murmured. "Come and sit beside me and tell me what is the matter?" She touched a chair near the fire and beside her own; and Bobby dropped into it feeling as if he had been the cruellest and most hard-hearted of young men.

"Morgan has told me that you are going to give up cards! I am so glad," she said, after Bobby had assured her that there was nothing the matter, and that he had not been able to come because he had been "busy."

"Oh, pray, pray keep to that! I have seen so much misery through gambling; and I do hate it so! Besides," she added with an air of innocence which would have done credit to a first-class actress, "you will be able to sit and talk to me while they are playing; for of course, Mr. Morgan and Mr. Trevor will play."

And in this way she talked to him, singing conscience to rest, and the beautiful bewitching face blotted out all remembrance of his resolve not to see her again.

Then Trevor came in.

He scowled at Bobby as he nodded to him.

"Thought you had gone into the country or abroad," he said, sullenly. "Deuced cold!" He gave a little shudder as he drew nearer the fire. His face was pale and his eyelids were swollen, and inflamed. It struck Bobby that Trevor had been drinking heavily, and Laura shot a glance at him as he stood gazing at the fire moodily.

Presently Morgan Thorpe came in.

"My dear Deane—Trevor—forgive me! I'm late!" he said, with his charming smile. "Trevor, how well and fit you look!"

Trevor glowered at him sullenly.

"Do I? Then my looks belie me, for I feel anything but fit. It's this beastly cold weather coming in so suddenly."

"Your dinner will put you right!" said Morgan Thorpe, brightly. "And there's the bell!"

As Laura rose, Trevor bent over her.

"Let that cub go first to-night," he said. "I'll stay after him, I want to speak to you!"

She made a motion of assent and smiled up at him—sweetly, confidingly.

Thorpe was in the best and brightest of humors, and once or twice Bobby thought what that resolution would have cost him if he had stuck to it. They were such pleasant people, the Thorpes; and Laura—was an angel.

Trevor drank a great deal—as usual—through his dinner; and Thorpe plied him with "the earl's wine" assiduously; and after a time, his face got flushed and the somber fire burned in his eyes.

They went into the drawing-room where, as usual, Laura was playing so softly on the piano, and Bobby went and sat down beside her and turned over the music. Morgan Thorpe opened out the card table.

"Do you play to-night, Deane?" he asked.

Bobby shook his head.

"Not to-night," he said, reddening. Laura's left hand stole out toward him, encouragingly, sympathetically.

"Why not?" demanded Trevor, looking across at him with surprise.

"Can't afford it," said Bobby, with a touch of his old spirit.

Trevor sneered.

"That's a reason no one can meet," he said, with a sneer. "Go on, Thorpe."

Bobby flushed still more hotly; but the small hand sought and found and pressed his. The play went on; Bobby remained beside the piano, or sat on a chair close—very close—beside Laura's, near the fire. They talked in a low voice, which, low though it was, seemed to annoy and irritate Trevor, and once he turned toward them fiercely and demanded :

"What on earth are you two whispering and mumbling about?"

Laura laughed softly.

"Mr. Deane is telling me about his coach, his crammer. He must be such a funny man! Are you winning or losing, Mr. Trevor? The former, I hope. Why don't you give up cards and come and sit around the fire, like good Mr. Deane and me?"

He swore under his breath.

"Losing," he said.

She turned to the fire again, and the play went on. Half an hour later Mr. Morgan Thorpe said affectionately :

"Laura, my dear, will you give us a little champagne?"

## CHAPTER XVII.

SHE rose and got a bottle. Bobby opened it, and she filled the glasses of the players. Then she leaned over Trevor's cards, just dealt, and touched them with the slim taper finger of her left hand; with her right she smoothed the soft dark hair from her forehead.

Trevor looked up at her, and caught her hand, held it for a moment, then pressed it to his lips. Bobby saw the action, but Morgan Thorpe did not, or appeared not to see it. She pouted, withdrew her hand away slowly, and went back to her place. A moment later Trevor flung down his cards.

"Lost!" he said. "Was it double or quits?"

"It was," replied Morgan Thorpe. "Lucky I played that king, Trevor."

"Yes," snarled Trevor. "It was almost as if you knew I held the queen."

Thorpe laughed.

"Wasn't it? A mere fluke on my part—a rare piece of luck!"

Trevor pushed some bank-notes across the table, drank a draught of champagne, and rose suddenly, very nearly upsetting the table.

"I'm done for to-night," he said roughly.

He went towards the fire, and stood glowering at it, his hands thrust in his pockets.

"And so you don't play, eh, Deane?" he said, looking down at Bobby with a sneer.

"No," said Bobby, "I've chucked it ! As I said, I can't afford it!"

"By Heaven ! it would have been well for me if I'd come to that decision years ago," said Trevor, with a harsh laugh.

Bobby rose.

"I must be going," he said. "Are you coming, Trevor?"

"No," replied Trevor, curtly.

Bobby said good-night—"You will come again soon?" Laura murmured, as she pressed his hand—and he left.

Trevor stood staring at the fire for a few minutes ; then he looked over his shoulder at Morgan Thorpe, who was lighting a cigarette.

"Thorpe—I want to speak to your sister," he said.

Morgan Thorpe looked over his cigarette, and raised his brows.

"Certainly, my dear Trevor !" he said pleasantly. "I efface myself instanter !"

When the door had closed upon him, Trevor looked down at the woman sitting over the fire. His eyes were bloodshot ; they, and his red hair, accentuating the pallor of his face.

"Laura, I want to speak to you," he said. "I'm sick of this."

She looked up at him with a faint smile.

"It's about played out as far as I am concerned," he went on in a strained voice. "I can't stand it any longer, and, d—n it, what's more, I won't!"

"Why use such language—what is the matter ?" she murmured.

"Never mind my language" he retorted ; "it expresses my feelings ! Laura, you know I love you ; you know that I have loved you—bah ! what's the use of saying it ? You know it all ! Will you be my wife ? I want your answer. I'm sick of this game, sick of seeing you flirting with that—that d—d boy ! If you care for me enough to be my wife, say so. I can't, and I won't, wait any longer."

His eyes shone redly, his lips were set, and dry, and his voice rasped huskily. For a moment the woman was daunted. She had played this man as an angler plays a

trout—now tightening, now loosening the line. And now that he had come to the surface, lo ! it was not a harmless trout, but a shark, a dragon, with gleaming teeth—a thing almost to be feared. She turned pale under the powder, but she smiled tenderly as she murmured :

“ You know I care for you—Ralph ! ”

“ Do I ? ” he said. “ But do I ? I’m not so sure that I do ! Sometimes I have half an idea that you—you have been fooling me, that—— ”

The words were broken by his clinched teeth. His face grew red. Then, suddenly, his mood changed, and he flung himself on his knees beside her, and gripped her hands. “ Laura, for heaven’s sake, tell me the truth ! If you love me, be my wife—at once—at once ! I cannot, I will not, wait any longer. I am half mad with love for you ! I am drifting to the devil, while you—you keep me shilly-shallying ! You know that—you know that I am on the road to ruin ! Marry me and save me—if you love me ! If you do not, then—then—I will go ! Oh, Laura ! have pity on me ! ”

His upturned face was distorted by his passion, and suddenly his head fell until his face was hidden in her lap—his hands gripping her dress.

There was something terrible in his self-abandonment, terrible and pitiable, and most women would have been both terrified and pitying. But this woman had no heart, and was incapable of pity. The touch of fear which had assailed her passed away as he surrendered himself to his passion, and loathing and contempt took its place.

She looked down, with a *moan* of contempt, at the bowed, red head, at the clinched hands, upon which the veins stood out in thick cords; but her voice was exquisitely tender and loving as she whispered :

“ You know I love you, Ralph, and—and I will marry you if you wish it ; if you think it wise to trust your life to mine, so full of sorrows of the past.”

He raised his head, his face transfigured by relief—joy, and putting his arm round her, he drew her down to him.

“ Laura, my own ! ” he cried, hoarsely.

She suffered the embrace for a moment ; she even put

her lips to his hot forehead, then she slipped from his arms and rose.

"Go now, Ralph," she said, caressing his hand, "you—you almost frighten me!"

"Forgive me, dearest, forgive me! If you knew how I love you——"

"Perhaps I do!" She smiled sweetly at him, and let her head rest on his breast for a moment. "But Ralph, we—we must not be rash. You will wait——"

His face darkened instantly.

"Wait! Why should we?" he began.

"Foolish boy! I do not mean for long; for—for a month."

"A fortnight!" he said, eagerly. "Three weeks then!"

She made a gesture of assent.

"Go now, dearest!"

She had to endure his parting embrace with a tender, smiling affectation of returning it; but what it cost her was expressed by the cry of disgust which broke from her lips almost before he was out of hearing.

Morgan Thorpe, coming in, found her crouching over the fire, and wiping her lips, her arms, which his lips had touched, with her handkerchief as if to free them from some stain.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, with a gesture of loathing. "Why did you not come in sooner and save me from that—that savage?"

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Has Trevor——"

"Yes," she said, between her teeth. "He has been making love—has asked me to be his wife—" she gave a low laugh of derision—"and insisted upon an answer!"

"And what did you say?" he asked.

She laughed again.

"Yes!"

He started.

"Great Heaven! Couldn't you have——"

"No I couldn't!" she broke in, with something like a snarl. She did not look very beautiful at that moment. "I could not put him off. I was—yes—afraid. He behaved like a madman. Look at my hair! I hate all men—you are all brutes!"

Morgan Thorpe watched her with a cunning intentness.

"This is indeed serious!" he said again. "Look here, Laura, this chap isn't like most of the others—he's a nasty one to tackle. We shall have to make a bolt for it."

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"Yes; we must fold up our tents, like the Arabs and silently steal away," he said. "It's lucky he didn't break out before."

"Yes; I suppose you've plucked him pretty well by this time?" she said, callously.

Morgan Thorpe nodded quite as callously.

"Pretty near," he assented. "And come to think of it, it's as well that we should make a move. The other boy has grown shy, and there's no more to be made out of him."

She yawned with profound indifference.

"He's not so bad as the others," she said. "He's only a fool—Trevor is a brute and a savage as well."

"All the more reason for giving him the slip," said Morgan Thorpe. "We could clear out in a few days. By a stroke of luck I have not paid the last quarter's rent." He poured out some wine and took it to her, and she drank it at a draught, and he followed her example. "I'm not so sure that the other boy, Deane, is quite exhausted," he said, musingly. "Look here, Laura, here's an idea!" He came over to the fire and leaned against the mantel, looking down at her. "He won't play any more, I'm certain of that; but couldn't we run a grand coup? How would it be if you were to work him for a biggish sum, say a couple of hundred pounds?"

She yawned.

"How?"

"It's easy enough; you can do anything with him."

"I'm not so sure," she said, reflectively. "He's not such a fool as you think him, and I fancy he is getting a trifle suspicious. I saw him look at me curiously when I was making the sign behind Trevor to-night."

"Oh! Then it's time we wound up these operations. But, look here, I'll show you the way to draw that couple of hundred, my dear girl. You go to his rooms one night: Woman in great distress; tearful 'make-up,' with dark rings round the eyes. You've come to him—risking compromising yourself, and all that—because

you are in great trouble. Threatened with ruin unless you can obtain a couple of hundred pounds. Have come to him because he is the closest, truest friend you have. See! He can save you by just putting his hand to a little bill. You may not want to use it; will in all probability return it to him in the morning; but in any case it will save you from ruin and despair. See?"

He rolled off the nefarious scheme fluently, and she listened, with her head on one side, her eyes fixed on the fire. Then she laughed.

"I dare say I could manage that," she said.

"Of course," he said, with a laugh. "The boy's in love with you. You take him unawares, give him no time to think; you can promise him anything—seeing that we can start in the morning."

She yawned. There was no compunction in her nature, no sense of shame. She had been an adventuress all her life and a successful one—simply because of that absence of compunction and shame.

"Very well," she said. "Oh yes; I can do it easily enough. But, mind, I take that two hundred, Morgan!"

His face fell.

"My dear Laura! Think of my expenses!"

She looked at him with a glint of anger in her eyes.

"I take that two hundred," she repeated, emphatically. "You have plenty of money; I know that, and I've wondered sometimes where you get it. You have had more than you got from Trevor and Deane."

He changed color, and she laughed, contemptuously. "Don't trouble to lie," she said, coolly; "I shouldn't believe you. And I don't care how you get it. All I know is that I mean to have this haul. And do you know how I am going to spend it?"

"Another diamond bracelet? My dear, you might get it on credit—"

"No; I'm going to spend it on detectives. I am going to find out that husband of mine."

Mr. Morgan Thorpe smiled a sickly smile.

"Yes!" she said with sudden fury. "I mean to find him. You've tried—or pretended to—and have failed. I'm going to try and I mean to succeed!"

"My dear, why be angry with me? I hope you will

succeed; though why you should want him, seeing that you hate him like poison——”

“Yes, you're right. I hate him like poison; and that's why I want him! I'm going to make life a hell for him!” She rose and stood looking before her with eyes which blazed with a malignant fire; her lips were parted showing her white, even teeth; her powder showed almost yellow against her white face; her small hands were clinched tightly at her side.

Morgan Thorpe looked at her with a mixture of fear and admiration.

“Upon my soul, Laura! I don't envy him if you do find him!” he said, with an uneasy laugh.

She drew a long breath.

“You'd have no cause to!” she said, significantly, as she moved toward the door. “Tell me when you want me to get that money. Good-night.”

The next morning Mr. Morgan Thorpe began his preparations for a sudden and secret flight. Such preparations with gentlemen of Mr. Morgan Thorpe's character are beautifully simple. They consist in getting as many articles on credit as confiding and trustful tradesmen will supply. He bought a nice stock of clothes, some choice cigars, a few—but they were costly—articles of jewelry; he borrowed as many five-pound notes as he could from men with whom he had scraped acquaintance. It was—“By Jove, I've left my purse at home! My dear fellow, will you lend me a few pounds for to-night!” And, at last, when the landlord of 31 Cardigan Terrace, wrote demanding the rent by return of post, Mr. Morgan Thorpe informed his sister, that everything was ready for the exodus, and that she might ring off her grand coup against that young fool, Deane.

She went up to her room after dinner, and locked the door, and in about an hour she came down and presented herself for approval, as it were.

Morgan Thorpe looked at her as she stood before him and uttered an exclamation of admiration. She was pale, there were dark rings round her eyes; but her expression was the highest achievement. She looked hunted, harassed, full of despair.

“By Heaven! you ought to have gone on the stage,

Laura!" he said fervently. "You ought indeed! Why, you'd melt a heart of stone with that face and that look! Really, I think I should try for three instead of two hundred!"

She laughed, the heartless, callous laugh of the adventuress.

"Too high a sum would frighten my baby," she said. "Call a cab for me, Morgan. Here—give me a glass of champagne before I go."

He gave it to her, still eying her with admiration.

"Perfect actress!" he murmured, ecstatically.

She laughed and nodded exultingly.

"Oh! I shall play the part all right. It's easy enough with such an innocent child as he is!"

"If Trevor comes, I'll have him told that you're in bed with a headache."

She arrested the second glass on its way to her lips and exclaimed:

"Thank Heaven, I shall escape from him! He was here yesterday, and—Well, that was a hard part to play. It was as much as I could do to keep from screaming out; "I hate you—hate you! Take your hands off me!"

Morgan Thorpe laughed.

"By this time to-morrow you will have put a good many miles between you and that too ardent lover of yours, my dear," he said.

He called a cab, and closely veiled she entered and was driven off.

As she passed from the house to the cab Trevor came round the corner. He saw her, and recognized her, and he stood still for a moment with astonishment. Then he went on to the house, and knocked.

"Is Mrs. Dalton at home?" he asked, as coolly as he could.

"Yes, sir," replied the French maid, blandly. "But madam is confined to her room with a bad headache."

She saw him wince and start, saw the blood leave his face slowly.

"I'm sorry!" he said, curtly. "Tell her—But never mind. Good-night, Marie."

He went down the steps and walked a few paces.

Then he ran. The cab was still in sight. At the end of the street he hailed and jumped into a hansom.

"Follow that cab!" he said. "Keep out of sight if you can. Follow it, and mind you don't lose sight of it!"

He crushed an oath between his teeth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaunt stood with his back to the door, which he had closed on Decima, and waited. He heard the frou-frou of a woman's dress, the other door opened, there came the faint perfume which he remembered so well—and loathed so bitterly—and the woman, his wife, entered.

The lamp was low, and shaded by a deep crimson shade; the firelight flickered. In the faint light she did not in the first moment or two of her entrance see him. She moved to the fire, carefully threw back the hood of her fur cape, and held out her hands to the fire, and he, motionless and in silence, watched her.

He had once loved or persuaded himself that he had loved this woman. He could have laughed aloud with bitter self-scorn and mockery.

She warmed her hands daintily, glanced at the clock, yawned, put up her hands to smooth the hair which the hood had ruffled, then turned and looked round the room, and saw him.

For a moment she did not recognize him, and uttered a faint cry of surprise. Then, with a shriller, though strangely repressed, cry, she moved toward him, her head projected, her eyes fixed on him. She looked as she moved like an exquisitely beautiful snake. She was within a couple of paces before the words :

"It is you!" broke from her parted lips.

Gaunt, white and rigid, made a gesture of assent.

"Yes," he said. "Why are you here?"

She drew a long breath, as if she were choking; then she came nearer and stared at him as she broke into a laugh—a laugh of triumph, of derision.

"It is you?" she repeated. "You—my husband! Well—my God! it's too good to be true! You—you here! How did you come? Why—"

She looked round the room as if amazed and perplexed, and then back at him. Her beautiful face flushed beneath the paint, her eyes shone like stars within the artistically

drawn shadows. It was the face of a mask suddenly, hideously, endued with life.

“This is my home—my rooms,” he said.

His own voice seemed to him as if it belonged to some one speaking at a great distance.

“Your—your rooms?” she repeated, dully. Then her eyes glittered, and she laughed. “Yours? Then—then—you are Lord Gaunt?”

“I am Lord Gaunt—yes,” he said, as dully and mechanically as before.

She put her hand to her forehead, and then to her throat, as if the thoughts that were crowding on her were suffocating her.

“You—you are Lord Gaunt? These rooms are yours? You are a nobleman—a swell—and my husband?”

“Yes,” he said, in exactly the same lifeless tone; “I am your husband.”

She leaned against the back of a chair and breathed heavily; then she laughed.

“I have found you—found you at last! And you are Lord Gaunt! And I am—yes, I must be, of course, Lady Gaunt! Lady Gaunt! My God! this was worth living for!—”

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

“It is worth living for!” she repeated, with a choking laugh. “To think of it!” She snatched up a book from the small table near her and dashed her hand on the inside of the cover which bore his bookplate, with its coat-of-arms above his name and title. “To think that I knew you were the owner here, that I’ve seen your name in all these books, and never knew, never guessed!—”

She paused, breathless with excitement and triumph. Her voice, usually so musical, was thick and vulgar; the vulgarity of a common nature was bursting through the thin coating of veneer, and she was at that moment, for all her beauty and grace, a virago of the worst type as she confronted him.

Gaunt stood quite still, his eyes fixed on her with the calmness of despair, the impassivity of disgust.

"Why did you leave me?" she demanded, stridently.  
"Why did you do it?"

"Can you ask?" he said very quietly. "Do you think it was possible for me to remain with you when I discovered—what you were, what and who it was I had married?"

The reply infuriated her. She took a step toward him, and stared into his face with the passion of hate burning in her black eyes.

"You deserted me!"

"I left you, yes," he said, as calmly as before. "But deserted—in the strict, the legal, sense—no. I provided for you—"

"A beggarly allowance! You married me in a false name!"

"No," he said again, with a touch of weariness in his voice. "Edward Barnard, are two of my names. I concealed my family name and title; yes, that is true. I must have had some presentiment of—what you were!"

She flung her arms out.

"The law will reach you! punish you!" she hissed.

He made a slight gesture of indifference.

"You cannot get rid of me," she exclaimed, with an air of triumph. "You cannot divorce me—you would if you could!"

"No!" he said, in exactly the same tone. It was as if he were confronting her passion with the calmness of despair, the indifference of the rock to the howling wave which beats against it in vain. "Do what you will, I should not seek for a divorce. I am content to suffer anything rather than bring shame and disgrace upon the name I bear."

"You can bring no charge against me!" she said, defiantly.

He made a gesture of assent.

"I am glad," he said, with a sigh. "I left you because I discovered what you were before I married you— Be silent a moment!" for she had opened her lips as if about to protest—retort. "Put yourself in my place. I loved you, deeming you all that a girl should be, all that a woman should be, who takes the name of an honest man. I found— Ah! why should I tell you? You know!"

She flung herself into a chair, and leaning her face on her hand, looked up at him with a mixture of defiance and hatred.

"What else could I do but leave you?" he said. "What other course was open to a man of honor when he had discovered that he had married—an adventuress of the worst, the vilest, type. God knows I loved you——"

She laughed discordantly.

"Not you!" she retorted.

"Yes," he said as calmly as before; "I loved you. Why else should I have married you? I should have loved you to the end, while life lasted, if I had not learned what you had been. Even then I would have fought against that terrible knowledge, and—and remained with you, if I had not learned also that you were without a heart, that you had married me for a place in the world, for money——"

He paused and looked gravely at her. All the while he had been talking to her, looking at her, he had been thinking of Decima; had been contrasting this woman, his wife, the adventuress, with her vile past, contrasting her with the pure-minded girl who had just left him. It was as if an angel of light had flown from his side, and a fiend in woman's shape had taken her place. His heart felt numbed with the misery of despair, with the utter hopelessness of the situation.

It was as if he had been suddenly awakened from an exquisite dream of bliss to find that his hours were numbered, or, worse still, that the rest of his days were to be spent in a darkness and anguish beyond words to describe.

His hand touched the key of the door behind him and half mechanically he locked it, and moved to the fireplace and looked at her again.

"I am sorry that you have compelled me to say all this," he said, with a courtesy more galling than any vituperation, any reproach, would have been. "Will you tell me what, having found me, you intend to do? I suppose you and your brother have made some plans."

She raised her eyes suddenly.

"Did Morgan know who you were—that you lived here?" she demanded.

Gaunt looked faintly surprised.

"Yes," he said, quietly. "Was it not he who betrayed me? It would be like him, worthy of him. I did not bribe him heavily enough, I suppose."

"You—you bribed him? Then he knew all the time, and kept it from me! Kept it from me all the while he was pretending to look for you!"

"Yes," said Gaunt, indifferently; for what did it matter now? "I bribed him, as you put it. I paid him to keep the secret of my identity. He discovered it——"

She sprang to her feet.

"You are a pretty pair!" she exclaimed, with a hard laugh. "So he has been taking money to—to help rob me of my rights! Oh, I'll be even with him!"

"I have do doubt you will," said Gaunt, wearily. "But may I ask you to answer my question? What do you intend to do?"

"What am I going to do?" she said, mockingly, tauntingly. "Can you ask? I am going to have my rights! I am going to live with you——"

He made a slight gesture of dissent.

"You cannot do that," he said, gravely. "I could not live with you!"

"You can't help it!" she said, jeeringly. "The law is on my side, and it shall help me! I'll go to law! I will go to a solicitor directly I leave here! He shall claim my right to have your name—my proper title—Lady Gaunt."

"I cannot withhold that from you," he said, with perfect calm.

"No, and I mean to hold you, too!" she said, defiantly, gloatingly. "Where a husband is, there a wife has a right to be. You can't cast me off, and you shall not! I'll have my title, and—and half your money——"

"Ah, yes," he said, almost to himself.

"Yes, and I'll go into the world, the society my rank is entitled to; and I'll go as your wife—by your side. You shall take me and introduce me to all your relations and friends."

He smiled bitterly, coolly, and the smile seemed to madden her.

"You refuse?" she said.

"I refuse, yes," he said, grimly. "You may have all else you demand. The title, the money—far more than half of that which belongs to me—but no more. I could not face the world by your side—"

She laughed stridently.

"Could you not? We will see! The law will help me! I will enter an action—compel you, yes, compel you, to acknowledge me, and live with me."

"You cannot," he said, as if he were stating a simple fact. "I leave England in a few hours; I shall be beyond the reach of even your malice!"

She sprang from the chair, upsetting it in her violence, and it fell against the small table, overturning it. It came to the ground with a crash, and the bric-à-brac was strewn upon the floor. As she rose to her feet she uttered a cry, a cry like that of a wild beast balked of its revenge.

Gaunt looked at the overturned table and curios indifferently. A knock came to the door.

"Did you call, sir?" asked the maid outside.

"No," said Gaunt, and she went away.

"Take care!" said Laura, hoarsely, as she pushed the hair from her forehead. "You don't know what I can do! You talk of your name—the disgrace and shame! I can drag it in the dust for you, and, by Heaven! I will, too! I'll tell the whole story! I'll fill the papers with 'Lord and Lady Gaunt's case'; I'll make you a laughing stock throughout England!"

"Yes," he said, with a terrible calmness. "You can do that, and I have no doubt you will. But you cannot compel me to live with you. And the world will understand why I do not."

Her face became white, and she ground her teeth.

"What do I care?" she said. "I shall have had my revenge. You won't be able to show your face in England again; and I—I shall live here; shall be Lady Gaunt, your wife, your ill-used wife—"

He smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Let that thought console you; let it content you. I shall say no word, utter no denial."

The calmness of his acquiescence startled her. She went closer to him, and looked at him keenly.

"You are going away—out of England. Are you going alone, I wonder?"

For the first time his calmness broke down. It was as if she had found the chink in his armor through which she could thrust an envenomed dagger. She saw the change in his expression, and uttered a cry.

"Ah! you are not. There is some other woman!" she laughed, discordantly. "Don't deny it! I can see it in your face! So, that's it! I can understand now!"

She stood before him, her face flushed, her eyes glittering.

"What a fool I was not to have hit upon it before! There's another woman!"

He had regained his old calmness and met her furious, taunting gaze with impassive sternness. No man could be more impassive, more stonelike, than Gaunt when he chose.

"You don't deny it!" she went on, scanning his face. "And, I know that look! There is some one else!"

She came and stood beside him, so close to him that the perfume he hated seemed to suffocate him. He caught his breath, but said not a word; and his silence increased her fury.

"You talk of shame and disgrace!" she said. "You hypocrite! You—you liar! Shame and disgrace, indeed! Yes, you shall have them, and not you alone, but she, whoever she is! I'll find it all out. I'll have the best detectives money—your money—can buy, and I'll drag her through the divorce court."

He did not move a muscle, but stood regarding her with perfect calm.

"Who is she?" she demanded. "You may as well tell me. One of your great lady friends—a woman of rank or some common girl?" She paused for breath and looked round the room.

As evil chance would have it, her eye fell upon Decima's veil. It had come unfastened from the side of her hat as Decima had entered, and she had taken it off and laid it on the top of a cabinet.

Laura sprang to it, and, seizing it, held it out to him.

"Whose is this?" she demanded, hoarsely. "Why, she's here now—this moment! In your rooms!"

She sprang to the door of the inner room, and tore at the handle. Then, when she found it was locked, she turned upon him.

"She's here—in this room. Unlock that door! Unlock it! I'm your wife, and I order you—" Her voice broke and failed chokingly. Gaunt watched her—or say, rather, that his eyes were fixed on the veil. Remember how he loved Decima, how devotedly he worshiped her innocence and purity. He pictured this fury dragging out the girl he loved and covering her with vituperation and abuse; remember this and bear with him, for he needs all your charity and clemency.

He sprang forward, and, seizing her by the arm, flung her on to the couch.

"Silence!" he said, as he tore the veil from her fingers. "Silence you—you desecrate!"

He thrust the veil in his breast and stood over her, panting and struggling for the mastery of his passion. "Do what you will," he said at last, when he had regained something like calm. "Do all you have threatened. But—but go now; leave me! It is not safe!"

His voice rose at the last words; they could have been heard plainly by anyone who happened to be in the corridor.

She leaned back, rubbing the arm he had gripped.

"Go! go!" she retorted, defiantly, tauntingly. "No, I will not go! Why should I? This is your house, and I am your wife! My place is here! I shall not go! And you can't compel me! I am your wife, your wife! It's that other woman who is hiding here, the other—"

She uttered a word that cannot be written, and as it struck his ears Gaunt raised his hand as if to silence the mocking taunting, lips. Then the hand fell to his side, and he said, hoarsely:

"If you will not go, I will! Stay where you are! Do not attempt to follow me! I—I cannot answer for myself!"

He strode to the door and unlocked it and looked at her for a moment.

"Go!" she cried, with a strident laugh. "Go to her. I stay. This place is mine—mine. I am your wife! As

for her—shame and disgrace. You shall have enough of it—both of you—and to spare, I'll——”

Gaunt took up his hat, passed into the inner room, locking the door as he did so. He looked round wildly. The room was empty. Decima was not there. His brain was in a whirl ; he scarcely knew where he was, what he was doing. All his thoughts were of Decima ; to get her out of the place, out of reach of the demon he had just left.

He looked round the room again.

Her hat and jacket were not there. He went hurriedly into the next room—a bath and dressing-room—she was not there, nor was there any trace of her.

The room adjoining was a kind of “den,” in which he kept his guns and fishing tackle, a bachelor’s litter-room. She was not there. He looked round and drew a breath of relief. She must have gone. It was just possible that she had not heard a word of what had passed between him and his wife. Oh, God—his wife !

He stood for a moment and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He had been calm enough until the last moment or two ; but now his heart was beating furiously, and he was all of a shake. But it was because he was thinking of Decima.

He saw now how mad—how bad—he had been. He had tempted her, persuaded her to fly with him ; he had tempted her to her ruin. In a moment, overwhelmed by his passionate love, he had lured her to her ruin. And she would have come to his lure ! He saw now, as by a flash of lightning, how bad, how cruel, he had been.

Thank God ! she had escaped ! He had lost her forever, should never see her again ; but—no matter, she was saved ! As for him—what did it matter what became of him ? ”

He sank into a chair, his head bowed in his hands. A terrible blow had fallen upon him ; but the hand of Providence which had dealt it had, at the same time, been stretched out to save her—his dear, sweet girl love !

She had gone. She was safe at Lady Pauline’s house in Berkeley Square. Safe from him and his fatal love.

He was glad, and yet, and yet the thought that she was lost to him, that he should never hold her in his arms

again, never, perhaps, see her again, filled him with anguish. He could have borne it all if he had not known that she loved him. But he knew that she loved him. To hear her sweet confession of love ringing in his ears, to feel her kisses upon his lips ! He was almost mad with longing and with remorse.

He rose presently. It had seemed hours while he was sitting there ; in reality it had only been minutes. He rose and looked round with the numbed feeling of a man waking from chloroform.

From this room a door led directly on to the corridor. It was always kept locked, but the key was in its place. He went to turn it, but found the door unlocked. Then he understood ; Decima had escaped—yes, that was the word, escaped ! this way.

He drew the key from the lock sharply. It had been in its place so long that it stuck, and, as he jerked it violently, it cut his finger. He did not feel the cut, did not know that his finger was bleeding, until he saw a spot of blood on the wristband of his shirt.

With an impatient gesture he put the key in his pocket, wiped his finger on his handkerchief, and passed into the corridor, locking the door behind him.

As he went down the corridor he heard voices, and he saw the parlor maid leaning beside the elevator, talking to the porter within it.

She started guiltily at sight of him, and as the man touched his hat the maid fled hastily.

Gaunt returned the salutation, and went quickly down the stairs.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

THE infuriated woman tore at the handle of the door for a moment, then she stopped. There had been something in Gaunt's face, in his eyes, which if it did not exactly frighten her, warned her that it would not be safe to follow him.

She left the door and paced up and down the room for a moment or two.

“ Yes, I'll wait. I'll stay here. It's my proper place !

I'm his wife. He shall find me here when he comes back—if he does come back; if he doesn't, I'll stay here; I'll drag his name in the dirt; I'll——”

She sank on the couch, and rocked herself to and fro. She was choking with passion. But presently the violence of the fit passed, and she rose and went to a mirror and looked at her face. She was burning hot; the perspiration had played havoc with her “make-up,” and the powder and colors showed in streaks upon her face. She wiped it with her lace handkerchief and smoothed her hair; then she looked round the room searchingly, went to the sideboard and, wrenching the door open, found what she was looking for. She poured herself out a glass of brandy, and drank some of it eagerly, greedily; then she drew a long breath, and, seating herself by the fire, bent forward, her chin resting in one hand, the glass held in the other.

She emptied the glass presently, then got up and refilled it, and drank again. The neat spirit soothed her, and after a minute or two she raised her head and looked round and laughed to herself.

“Lady Gaunt!” she muttered. “That sounds nice. I'm a lady of rank!” She rose and took a Court Guide from the book-shelf, found the page and read aloud the paragraph headed “Gaunt.” “He's all this and I'm his wife!” she said to herself, gloating over the information, the history of the name, the description of Gaunt's residences. “By Heaven! I'll have a good time! I'll enjoy myself with the best of them! And I'll have my revenge, too!” Her white, even teeth clinched together viciously. “I'll make him wish he'd never been born!” She looked over her shoulder towards the door of the inner room and shook the book at it threateningly. “And Morgan—I'll be even with him; I'll cast him off. Not one penny shall he have! I'll be even with him!”

She rose and stretched her arms above her head, with a gesture of relief and satisfaction.

“To have done with the old life! To be respectable—some one—a great lady! It sounds good—good—good!”

She laughed and flung herself on the couch. The spirit she had taken, and the reaction after the excitement of her fury and passion, were having their due effect upon

her, and presently her eyes closed, though she was not asleep. That Gaunt was in love with another woman, that she, Laura, suspected that other woman to be in the rooms, did not fill her with wifely indignation. She only saw in the fact a means of inflicting fresh misery and torture upon him. She could strike at him through this other woman; that was all she cared about.

Trevor had dismissed his cab at the corner of the street in which the Mansion stood. He did not need to drive up to the door, for he knew where Laura was going. He got out, paid the cabman, and stood staring down the street at the spot where she had disappeared as she entered the house.

He was shaking all over, and his brain was whirling. She—she who had told him that she loved him, had promised to be his wife—had gone, alone, to another man's room! The fact made him sick and giddy. He looked round vacantly. There was a public house at the corner of the street and he walked across to it, asked for a whisky and soda and lit a cigar. The barmaid, as she gave him the drink, noticed his deathly pallor and the bloodshot eyes, noticed also that his hand shook as he raised the glass to his lips, and she concluded he had been drinking.

“Looks bad, don't he?” she remarked to a fellow barmaid.

“Yes,” she assented. “Hope he ain't going to stop and make a scene. I do hate a row, and he'd be an ugly customer to get rid of quietly.”

Trevor, though he stayed some time and drank and smoked, was quiet enough. The liquor brought no color to his face, though his eyes grew more bloodshot; but his hand became steadier, and as he emptied his third glass and went out he nodded mechanically to the two girls, who had been watching him covertly. Flinging his cigar away, he crossed the street and went up the steps of the entrance to Gaunt's flat. The rooms were on the first floor. As a rule, the porter or a page boy were in the lobby; but on this occasion they were absent and Trevor went upstairs without seeing any one or being seen.

At the door of Gaunt's flat he paused and fought for calmness and self-possession. Then he put out his hand

to ring the electric bell, but as he did so he saw that the door was ajar. In her sudden flight at Gaunt's appearance the maid had unwittingly failed to close the door after her.

Trevor smiled grimly. All the better! He could steal in upon them, upon the faithless woman and the partner of her treachery, and confront them.

He pushed the door gently, and, passing through the corridor, opened the drawing-room door as gently and entered. He looked round the room, paused for a moment in surprise at its silence, then saw the figure lying on the couch. He closed the door noiselessly, turned the key and stole across the room to her.

Cautious though his movement had been, she heard him, and raising her head, she said:

"Oh, you have come back, have you? You've thought better of it——"

Then she saw who it was and broke off with a faint cry of surprise.

"Oh, it's you?" she said, contemptuously.

He stood and glared down at her.

"Yes, it's I!" he said. "What—what are you doing here? You didn't expect me?"

His voice was thick and harsh, his lips were strained tightly.

She regarded him with cool insolence, and dropped back, her face pillow'd on her hand.

"I certainly did not!" she said. "You followed me, I suppose?"

"What are you doing here?" he repeated, as if his mind were absorbed by the question.

"Followed me, like the mean spy you are!" she said.

"What are you——" he said again.

She interrupted him with a curt laugh.

"What business is that of yours?" she retorted.

His hand clinched at his side, and he moistened his lips.

"You can ask me that?" he said, hoarsely. "You—you can ask me that! But I don't want any answer——"

"Then why do you ask the question?" she said.

"There is no need to tell me," he said. "You are here in his rooms—alone—at night——"

She shrugged her shoulders and gazed up at him

through half-closed lids. The man's misery and rage gave her a kind of satisfaction, pleasure. She was heartless and cruel, and the infliction of pain upon this man, whom she hated, came as a relief after all she herself had endured.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" she said. "And if I am—"

He put his hand to his head.

"My God!" he said to himself, rather than to her. "And you said that you loved me. You promised to be my wife—my wife!"

She laughed and stretched herself into a still easier, a more indolently careless, attitude.

"Did I? It was a mistake. I never meant it. If you hadn't been fool enough to lose your head you'd have seen that!"

He looked at her, as if he could not bring himself to believe that he had heard aright.

"You never—" he gasped.

She smiled up at him.

"My dear fellow, if you mean that I never loved you, you are quite right. I certainly never did!"

He struggled for breath.

"Why—why did you say—" he panted.

She raised her head upon her hand and looked at him coldly, contemptuously.

"Oh, for several reasons," she replied. One, because Morgan wished me to keep you in tow, another, because—well, you were so mad that night that I was obliged to humor you."

He put his hand to his throat as if he were choking.

"Morgan?" he said.

She nodded.

"Yes; you may as well know the truth. You'd have discovered it sooner or later. You were useful to Morgan, you see."

He did see.

"He—he has robbed me!" he said, hoarsely, staring before him vacantly.

"Well, that's a coarse way of putting it; but it's your way to be coarse. It's your nature, and you can't help it. If you mean that Morgan—with my help—always man-

aged to win, you're right. Don't blame me. I was under his thumb, and had to obey orders. Go and find him and have it out with him. I don't mind," and she laughed heartlessly.

"You—you helped him!" he said, as if he were half stupefied.

She nodded and yawned.

"Yes; like the good and faithful sister that I am. I've often wondered you haven't detected us. I've seen you look up when I've been bending over you and making signs to him telling him the cards you held."

She laughed.

"My God!" he exclaimed.

"Don't blame me. Go to Morgan and call him to account."

"No," he said, "I don't blame you; you were in his power, under his thumb. But you did it, knowing all the time that I loved you. No!" broke from his strained lips. "I won't believe it! Tell me you are joking, that you are only saying it to tease me! Tell me, Laura!"

He flung himself on his knees beside the couch and tried to take her hand, but she whipped it behind her. He gazed at her piteously. He had meant to confront her, charge her with her faithlessness and treachery, and leave her overwhelmed by his scorn; but the sight of her, of the beautiful face, the graceful figure, had dispelled his rage. Even now that he had heard her confess, boast of, her duplicity and deceit, of the fact that she had helped to swindle and rob him, he could not resist the fascination of her presence, her voice.

"Laura," he said, hoarsely, "I can't believe it! No woman—least of all you—could do it! See, dear, I know you are joking. You are saying it to—to try me!" He laughed discordantly. "Well, I haven't risen to it; you can't take me in!"

She looked at him with unconcealed contempt.

"You must be mad!" she said.

"I suppose I am," he said, helplessly. "I—I came here—I followed you to have it out with you, to break the engagement, to cast you off, but I can't—I can't! Even though I find you here, in Deane's rooms—where is he?"

He broke off with the abruptness of a man whose mind is in too great a whirl to act consecutively.

"I don't know," she said ; "I haven't seen him."

A flash of hope smote across his misery.

"Then—then you did not come to—to meet him ?" he said, quickly, with a sharp breath.

"Oh, yes, I did," she said, coolly.

"Then it was by that scoundrel's—by Morgan's orders ?" he said, clutching at the hope that she had been forced to come.

She nodded "Yes!"

"Thank God !" he breathed. "Laura, forgive me—forgive all my doubts of you ! I might have known that—that you would not have been so false ! Forgive me ! I love you, Laura ! Come away with me now—come home. I will protect you from Morgan. We will be married at once !"

She shrank from him and stared with cold amazement.

"Come with you !—marry you ! Why, didn't I just tell you that I didn't care for you ; that I only said what I did, promised to be your wife, because I was obliged ? You must be stark, staring mad !"

He put his hand to his hot brow. Indeed, her confession of her baseness, her treachery, had been forgotten for the moment.

"You didn't mean it," he said, with a ghastly smile. "You are only teasing me, Laura ! Come !"

He rose and held out his arms and bent down as if to lift her from the couch. She sat up and pushed him away from her.

"Go with you ! Marry you ! Not if there wasn't another man in the world ! I hate you !"

He looked at her, the smile dying away on his face, his eyes distending.

"You—hate me ?"

"Yes," she said, between her teeth. "I've always hated you from the first. Why, what is there about you to take any woman's fancy ? Look in the glass !" She laughed heartlessly as she pointed behind him. "And you were always a bear and a savage. Many's the time when you've talked about your love and—and touched me that I've had hard work to keep myself from crying out !

And even Morgan sometimes found it difficult to stand you. If it hadn't been for your money—and I suppose that's gone now, or most of it!"

"Yes; it's gone," he said, dully, mechanically. He felt and looked like a man in a dream, a hideous nightmare which paralyzed him.

She laughed.

"For Heaven's sake, go! Deane or some one will come in, and there will be a scene!"

He did not move, but gazed down at her with his under lip dropping, his eyes vacant and expressionless.

"Do you hear? Why don't you go? I've answered you plainly enough. I've told you that I hate you, and that nothing would induce me to marry you!"

"Nothing—would—induce—you!" he said after her.

"No! Besides—" She yawned and stretched out her arms and looked at the bracelets upon them. "Besides, if I were ever so fond of you, I wouldn't marry you!"

"Why not?" he asked, thickly.

She laughed.

"Because I happen to be married already."

He stared at her, and his lips moved. He was repeating her words again, striving to grasp, to realize, their meaning. "Married—already?"

She nodded.

"Yes!"

"To—to him?"

He looked round the room.

She laughed. It amused her to mystify, deceive him.

"Yes—to him," she said.

"Secretly?" he breathed.

"Yes, yes, of course," she answered, impatiently.

"All—all the time—even when you said that you loved me—promised to be my wife?"

She made a gesture with her hands, as if she were utterly weary of his questions, his presence.

"Yes, yes! Oh, for Heaven's sake, go and leave me alone! What's the use of staying and worrying me? I never want to see you again!"

She rose and went past him toward the fireplace. Her movement seemed to break the spell, to release him from its benumbing influence. With a low snarl, like that of

a wild beast, he caught her by the arm and swung her round to him,

“ You—devil ! ” he hissed.

She struggled and uttered a cry. He covered her mouth with his hand and forced her on her knees. As he did so, his foot struck against the Persian dagger which lay among the other things which had been overturned.

He caught it up, jerked the blade from its sheath, and raised it above his head. His hand still covered her mouth, but if it had not, her tongue would have refused its office, for she was paralyzed with terror. She fought and struggled with him, but in vain. He held her in the grip of a vise ; his bloodshot eyes stared into hers, his hot breath scorched her cheek.

The shining blade was poised above his head for an instant or two, then it gleamed downward. There was a low, gurgling cry ; then as he released the blade the body fell away from him in a ghastly heap upon the floor.

He knelt beside it, looking at the dead face, at the tiny stream of blood which had already ceased to run. For a moment he did not realize what he had done, then, with a groan and a shudder that shook him from head to foot, he bent over her and moaned her name.

“ Laura ! Laura ! Laura ! ”

Time mowed down the fatal moments with its relentless scythe. It seemed to tick “ Murder, murder ! ” as they fell.

Trevor remained on his knees, staring vacantly at the dead, white face for full five minutes, listening to the accusing clock. Then he rose and staggered backward to the fireplace, his eyes still fixed on the face as if they were chained there.

Another five minutes passed before he realized that he was in danger. Some one—he, her husband—her husband !—might come in at any moment. He must fly.

With the instinct of self-preservation, the mechanical desire to conceal his deed even for a time, he went to the body, slowly, fearful, and, lifting it carefully, laid it on the couch. His eye caught Gaunt’s fur coat, and he took it up and covered the body with it. As he drew it over the beautiful face—never more beautiful than it was now in the calmness, the placidity of death—he shivered as if

with cold, and a low moan broke from his livid lips. He drew his eyes away slowly, and, taking up his hat, went slowly and still backward—to the door and opened it.

There was no one in the corridor. A servant was singing in the servant's room. He closed the door softly, very softly as if to avoid awaking the woman on the couch, and passed quickly, and on tiptoe, down the stairs and into the street.

And it was not until he had reached the crowded thoroughfare at the end that he remembered that no one had seen him enter the house or leave it.

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## CHAPTER XX.

DECIMA found herself standing on the pavement outside the Mansions; but she was scarcely conscious of how she got there. She had put on her things mechanically, hurriedly, and had fled from the house with uncertain feet, and at the edge of the larger and busier thoroughfare stood gazing vacantly before her.

A passing cab hailed her, and she got in. But she did not think to tell the man where she wished to be driven, and he had to ask her twice through the door in the roof before she could reply. At Lady Pauline's door she stood a moment, looking up and down the street with the same expression in her eyes, for she was asking herself whether it was really she, Decima Deane, who was standing there.

She rang at last and the charwoman let her in. "Oh, it is you, miss!" she said, garrulously. "I've had a bit of a fire in your room, thinking it would be more comfortable. Would you like to go up now, or can I get you anything?"

"I will go up now," said Decima.

Something in the girl's voice rather startled the woman, and she turned and looked at her.

"You seem tired, miss?" she said.

"Yes, that is it; I am tired," said Decima, dully.

She went into the bedroom. A fire was burning brightly; the woman lit some candles, and looked around tentatively.

"Is there anything I can get you, miss? I'm sorry that one of the maids ain't here. Perhaps you'd let me take your boots off for you?"

Decima sank into a chair and thanked her, and the woman took off the wet boots.

"Why, miss, you're shivering with cold!" she said. "Shall I get you a little something? Lor', I forgot as everything is locked up! But I could run round the corner and get you some brandy or some port wine."

Decima forced a mechanical smile to her white, wan face.

"Oh, no, no; thank you!" she said. "I shall be warm directly; it was kind of you to make so nice a fire—and, good-night!"

When the door had closed she sank back and shut her eyes.

What was it that had happened to her? Let her try and think! She had been so happy—so happy—only an hour ago—less than an hour ago! What had happened since then?

But only the cause of her happiness came back to her at first. She remembered that Lord Gaunt had come in, that they had sat talking, that his presence had filled her with a kind of gladness and pleasure. And then—he had told her that he loved her, and, then, in a strange, mysterious way, a veil seemed to have been torn aside from her inner life, and she had realized that she loved him, that she had loved him for—oh, ever so long—ever so long!

The color stole to her white face, her eyes became suffused with tears, tears of joy and infinite delight and peace. As she sat there she could hear his voice—"I love you, I love you!" it had said to her. Oh, wonderful, life-giving words! She could see his face; it stole between her closed lids and her eyes. The handsome face she loved so dearly! She could feel his kisses upon her lips, upon her hair, and a thrill ran through her, and the touch of color grew to a burning blush.

He loved her! He had said so; his kisses, his eyes, had been even more eloquent, more convincing, than his words.

Oh, how happy she was! To be loved by him!

"Every thought is of you ! I love you with all my heart and soul ! You hold my heart in the hollow of your hand !" What words they were ! And they were true—true ; for he could not speak falsely.

How happy she was ! Was there ever a girl in the world so blessed—so fortunate as she ? To be loved by him ! To know that his love was so great that he kept her ribbon—the poor, little faded ribbon !—next his heart, day and night ; just because she had worn it in her hair ! How—happy—happy—happy ! Then suddenly the pang of anguish smote her. But what had happened ? Why did this terrible weight, this dragging fear and shame, crush out all her happiness ? Then she forced herself to remember, and as she recalled the discovery of the portrait, his words, "My wife !" and all that had passed afterwards, she opened her eyes, and covered them with her hands, and a low cry of misery broke from her white and trembling lips.

He was married. Another woman was his wife ; it was not she, Decima, whom he ought to love, whom he could marry. He belonged to some one else. The beautiful woman whose picture he had held in his hands. Oh, what should she do, what should she do ? She leaned forward and rocked herself to and fro. The anguish in her heart was like a physical pain, racking and tearing at her.

She knew what she ought to do. She ought to cease loving him from that moment. It was her duty, her solemn duty, to tear his image from her heart ; to love him no longer, to forget him. But alas for poor human nature ! She found she could not do this. It is only the impossible heroines, in impossible, goody-goody novels, who, when they have discovered that the man they love is unworthy of them, or married to another woman, rise and nobly crush down their love and cast it from their hearts.

She ought to do it ; but—well, she could not.

Her face burned with shame ; her heart grew hot amidst its pain as she realized that, notwithstanding what she had learned that evening, notwithstanding that woman was Lord Gaunt's wife, she loved him still.

She threw herself on the bed at last, but she could not

sleep. The scene she had gone through passed through her brain, before her eyes again and again; it was like a scene in a play.

Toward morning she fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion in which Gaunt knelt before her, clutching at her arm, his voice rising and falling in the anguish of his entreaty.

A little after eight o'clock the charwoman knocked at the door and Decima awoke. She tried to rise, but could not. She felt as if her limbs were weighted with lead, as if there was one spot in her brain burning like a hot coal.

The woman knocked again, and Decima called to her to come in. Her voice sounded weak and strained, and the woman hurried to the bed, with a vague alarm, which grew into definite dismay as she looked at the white face, with the two spots of livid crimson glowing under the glittering eyes.

"Lor', miss, ain't you well?" she said, aghast. "You look—you look as if you was in a fever, that you do! You must 'ave got a chill last night."

Decima eyed her with profound indifference. "Yes, I think I am ill," she said as if she were speaking to some one else, some one who did not matter in the least, was of no possible importance. "I feel as if I could not move, and—and—my head is on fire!"

The woman was alarmed.

"I'll—I'll go for a doctor," she said, half speaking to herself. "I don't like the looks of you at all, miss."

Decima smiled indifferently—it was a piteous smile! "Do you think I am going to die?" she asked, calmly, almost hopefully.

The woman forced a laugh.

"Not you, miss!" she said. "Lor', it's only a feverish cold as 'ave took 'old of you!"

Decima sighed, and turned her head away, and the woman, after looking round helplessly for a moment, stole from the room, and did the most sensible thing she could have done. There was a telegraph office within a few yards, and she wired Lady Pauline and then hurried on to the nearest doctor.

When she came back Decima was staring at the ceiling with eyes which shone and glittered with fever, and her

hands were clinched on the satin coverlet as if she were holding on to consciousness by a supreme effort of will.

When Lady Pauline arrived she found the doctor bending over Decima, applying iced bandages to the burning head. He greeted Lady Pauline with a silent nod, and in silence, for a moment, she knelt beside the bed. Then she said, in a tremulous whisper :

“ She is very ill! What is it ? ”

“ Brain fever,” he said, gravely and aloud.

There was no need to whisper, for Decima could not hear.

“ How did she come here? I know nothing! ” she said, as she took off her bonnet and cloak. He was her own doctor, and he spoke with the candor which he knew she desired and would approve.

“ She came last night, about four o’clock, so the charwoman tells me. Then she went out—to her brother’s—and returned about ten. She was quite well on her first arrival, so the woman says, but looked pale and tired when she came in later.

“ Brain fever! ” said Lady Pauline, calm and on the alert by this time. “ I don’t understand! ”

He shook his head gravely.

“ Severe brain fever,” he said. Absolute candor was always required, demanded, by Lady Pauline, and he knew it. “ There was no other trouble. Something was on her mind, something must have occurred between the interval of her first arrival and her return to this house.”

Lady Pauline stared at him.

“ What could have happened? ” she said.

“ That we have to discover,” he said, quietly. “ She must be kept quiet; but you know the treatment as well as I do, Lady Pauline.”

Lady Pauline had for a time been a hospital nurse in her younger days. “ I’ll come back in an hour or two. Keep the ice bandages going, and if she should recover consciousness before I return keep her as tranquil as possible.”

Lady Pauline stood beside the bed with tightly compressed lips and aching heart. What had they done to this girl whom she loved with a mother’s love? The charwoman stole in presently, and Lady Pauline ques-

tioned her. She could tell no more than the doctor had already told. Lady Pauline sent her with a telegram to the servants to return, and resumed her place beside the unconscious girl. The doctor came in again, within his time.

"Something has happened to her, some shock," he said. "I can do nothing for her that you cannot do, Lady Pauline. Absolute quiet, tranquillity; that is all."

The hours dragged through. Later, Lady Pauline saw the white eyelids quiver, and presently Decima looked up at her.

"Aunt Pauline?" she said, in the thin, strained voice of fever.

"Yes, it is I, Decie, dear?"

The burning lips smiled woefully.

"I am glad you have come—very glad, Aunt Pauline!"

"Yes, dear?"

"Will you please tell Mr. Mershon that I cannot marry him?"

Lady Pauline repressed the start. Was the poor child delirious? But Decima smiled again, as if she read the question—the doubt.

"No; I am quite sensible, dear," she said. "I promised Mr. Mershon—but you see I didn't know then that I loved him."

"Him? Who?" asked Lady Pauline.

Decima stared at her as if surprised that the question should be necessary.

"Lord Gaunt," she said, quietly.

Lady Pauline could not repress the start now.

"Lord Gaunt!" she echoed.

Decima's hands clutched at the coverlet with feverish violence, but her voice, thin and hollow though it was, was calm and free from delirium.

"Yes," she said. "Didn't you know? I love him, and"—an exquisite smile lit up her face, making its pale loveliness angelic by its intensity—"he loves me."

Lady Pauline permitted a groan to escape her.

"He loves me," continued Decima. "We shall never see each other again, never. But I cannot marry Mr. Mershon: not even to save father and Bobby! Poor Bobby! I am sorry, but I cannot do it! I could have

done it if—if I had not seen him—when was it? I forget! Was it long ago—years ago? But I know that he loves me, and I love him. I shall never see him again; but I can't marry Mr. Mershon, or any one else. It is a pity, isn't it? But I cannot! Will you write to him and tell him? He lives at the Firs, Leafmore”—Her mind wandered for a moment. “Leafmore! How beautiful it is! If he would only stay! The schools—the cottages—the church! How good he is! He does all we ask him! How good he is! and I love him, love him, love him! His wife! No, I can't be his wife! There is another woman. Oh, why did he make me love him so?”

She moved her head from side to side with feverish restlessness; then, as if with an effort, she came back to full consciousness.

“Write to—to Mr. Mershon at once, Aunt Pauline. Tell him that I cannot—cannot! Ask him not to be angry! I know I am very wicked. Well, that is all, isn't it! I love him—love him! Promise, Aunt Pauline! I am slipping away—the light—the fire—all is growing dim! I can't see your face, though I know you are there! Promise!”

Lady Pauline bent over her.”

“I promise. Be satisfied, dear!” she said, and Decima closed her eyes and drew a long sigh of relief.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

LORD GAUNT found himself in the street outside the Mansions, very much in the condition in which Decima had been.

His brain was in a whirl. For his life had, so to speak, ended. He had lost Decima, the girl-love, who had filled his heart, who had been the one star shining in his darkened life. He had lost her, and it was well! He shuddered as he thought of the risk she had run through his overwhelming temptation. If Laura, his wife—his wife!—had not appeared, what would have happened? Decima would have gone with him, and he would have wrecked the life of the sweetest, the purest of God's creatures!

He shuddered again, and an icy blast seemed to sweep over him. He felt cold, and remembered his fur coat at that moment, so absolutely physical was the sensation which assailed him. He could not go back for the coat. He buttoned the shooting jacket and went on. For a time he walked without any thought of the direction he was taking, but suddenly he looked round and found himself before Lady Pauline's house in the square. He gazed up at the windows ; there was a light only in one ; it must be her room ; she was there. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he stretched his arms out toward the light and groaned. He paced up and down for a moment or two, until, indeed, a policeman eyed him suspiciously, and crossed over the road to inspect him more closely ; then Gaunt turned and strode on.

He had put up for the night at a quiet hotel in St. James', one of those old-fashioned places which men of Gaunt's tastes prefer. It was small, and not by any means gorgeous, but it was exclusive, and more expensive than any of the modern palatial caravansaries. The butler—the head waiter was always called the butler—met him in the small hall, prepared to help him off with his coat into which the man had assisted him, and was rather surprised at seeing Gaunt without it.

"I have left my coat at the—club, Wilkins," said Gaunt.

"Yes, my lord ; I will send for it," said Wilkins, promptly ; but Gaunt shook his head.

"Never mind," he said. "I will pick it up as I drive to the station to-morrow."

"As he spoke he handed his hat to the man, and Wilkins, taking it, saw the streak of blood on Gaunt's wrist.

"Have you cut your hand, my lord ?" he asked. He had known Gaunt ever since he was a boy.

Gaunt glanced at the stained wrist-band.

"Eh ? Oh ! ah ! yes, I think I have. No, no ; it is nothing. No, I won't have anything, thanks, Wilkins ; I will go straight up ; I am tired. You will have me called at half-past six, please ?"

He went up to his room, not a large, but an extremely comfortable one, for Morlet's Hotel was the perfection of comfort in all respects, and, locking the door, flung himself into a chair beside the fire.

Yes, his life was ended. Remorse and love tore at his heart like a couple of vultures. That he who loved her so dearly, so truly, should have tempted her to her ruin! His sweet, innocent girl-love, his pure, white angel! And he should never see her again! The thought affected him as at that moment its parallel was affecting Decima. He could have borne the parting—the eternal parting—better if he had not known that she returned his love; but to know that she loved him—actually loved him!—and to have to leave her forever was a torture that nearly drove him mad.

Incredible as it may seem, he had not yet thought of his wife. There was only room for Decima in his mind and heart. As to what Laura would do he was perfectly indifferent, when he did force himself to think of her. That she would carry out her threat, claim her right as his wife, and drag his name in the mire, was quite possible, and, more, probable; but what did it matter? Nothing she could do could affect him. In a few hours he would have left England. It was very certain that he would never return. She might do just what she pleased. He would give her, surrender to her all she claimed—excepting himself. His rank, his wealth, the position due to her as his wife, she might have; but not himself.

Then his thoughts returned to Decima. She must not marry Mershon. That he felt she would not do; but he would destroy Mershon's power; he would release the Deanes from the man's clutches. That, at any rate, he could do.

He went to the writing-table and wrote a letter to Pelford & Lang, the lawyers. It was short and to the point.

"Ascertain," he said, "the amount in which Mr. Peter Deane is indebted to Mr. Mershon, or any persons connected with the company started by him and Mr. Mershon, and discharge all his liabilities. I give you absolute carte blanche in the matter, and request that you will carry it through without a day's delay. It will have to be done with tact and discretion, and I leave the mode of doing it entirely to you, insisting only that it shall be done at once."

He drew a breath of relief as he addressed the envelope. At least he could snatch his dearest from Mr. Mershon's

clutches. But, alas! alas; that was all he could do! He could not heal the heart he had broken—for that he had broken it the memory of her face, of her eyes, as they rested on him at the moment of their parting convinced him. Yes, that was what—his love for her had wrought! He had broken her heart. Perhaps, after all, it would have been better if the other woman had not come in, and he and Decima had gone away together—together! But he put the thought away from him. It was desecration, a sacrilege. He had been mad with passion, with the intoxication of her presence, her sweet voice, and, more than all, her confession of love.

He paced up and down the room until dawn; then he packed the single bag he had with him—the rest of his luggage was already on board—and, flinging himself on the bed, tried to sleep. But, like Macbeth, he had murdered sleep, and he was still awake when the maid knocked at the door.

The sight of his face in the glass startled him; he was shaking like a man suffering from the effects of a drinking bout. But the cold bath pulled him together somewhat, and he made a pretense of eating the admirably cooked breakfast. Then he got into a cab and was driven to Charing Cross. Waterloo was his station for Southampton; but he had not intended taking Decima to Africa; he was known at Cape Town, was known to the officers of the vessel—the Pevensey Castle—in which he had booked his passage; so he had fixed on Egypt as their place of refuge, and he drove to Charing Cross on the chance. She might be there!

The clock struck eight as he drove into the station yard. He told the cabman to wait, and then looked for her—though he knew that she would not come.

She had not come. With a sigh and a twitch of his set lips, he got into the cab again, and was driven to Waterloo. He was just in time to catch the train.

At Southampton one of the Castle officials met him, and conducted him to the vessel.

“Your luggage and cases are on board, my lord,” he said. “Is this all you have? We start in less than an hour, or thereabouts.”

Gaunt went down to his cabin—the best in the vessel

—and found everything arranged comfortably. After a few minutes he went on deck and, lighting a cigar, got into a quiet corner and leaned against the side, apparently watching the bustling crowd, but in reality seeing nothing of it. A girl's face, white and terror-stricken, with quivering lips and straining eyes, floated before him; above the shouts of the men and the chatter of arriving passengers he heard Decima's voice crying, "Your wife! your wife!"

About half an hour before the sailing time Gaunt saw a man come along the gangway carrying a bag in his hand. He was a young man, with red hair and a pale face, with small, bloodshot eyes. The collar of his over-coat was turned up, and he looked cold and ill.

He came across the deck and paused by Gaunt and looked round. Gaunt watched him listlessly, scarcely noticing him. Presently the steward came to him and asked him the number of his berth.

The young fellow hesitated a moment, then he said, in a dull, expressionless voice :

"I don't know it yet. My name is Jackson; I wired for a berth this morning."

The steward consulted his list.

"Ah, yes, 'Jackson.' That's right, sir. I got the wire. I'm afraid you won't think the cabin first-rate, but it was short notice, you see."

Mr. Jackson nodded.

"I didn't know I was going till last night," he said. "Important business over there—sprung on me suddenly."

The steward nodded. A great many persons had of late had important business sprung upon them from Africa, and had been compelled to rush over there suddenly, and at short notice.

"No. 63, sir," he said. "If you'll come down I'll show you."

"Thanks," said Mr. Jackson. "When—when do we start?"

"Almost immediately, sir," said the steward, bustling ahead.

The young fellow glanced toward the quay, and round the deck, then followed him below.

The bustle and confusion increased; then suddenly the

signal sounded for the departure from the vessel of those who were not going on the voyage, and the usual parting of relatives and friends took place, and the visitors hurried ashore. A few minutes later the vessel started, and amid cheering and handkerchief-waving, slowed from the quay. Gaunt still remained in his quiet corner, and presently he saw the red-headed Mr. Jackson come up from the saloon. He stood at the entrance for a moment or two, then came across the deck and looked gloomily and yet vacantly at the now fast-receding quay; as he did so he took out a cigar-case and absently put a cigar between his lips. It was evident that his match-box was empty, for he dropped it into his pocket again and looked round.

Gaunt was standing near and silently extended his box. Mr. Jackson took it and lit a match, and Gaunt noticed that the man's hand shook. He looked across the lighted match as he held it to his cigar, and caught Gaunt's eye, and as if he knew that Gaunt had noticed the shaking of the hand, he said, rather reluctantly :

“Cold this morning!”

Gaunt nodded. He was not in the humor for conversation.

“Beastly cold!” said Mr. Jackson, with a faint shudder “But I'm somewhat nervous and—and feel it more than I should otherwise do, I suppose.”

He was silent for a moment, then he asked, carelessly :

“Do we stop at Madeira, do you happen to know? I've had to start suddenly—important business at the Cape—only heard last night—and so I don't know.”

“No; this is not one of the regular vessels. We stop at the Canaries.”

The young fellow nodded.

“Ah, thanks!” he said in a low voice.

Gaunt moved away, and presently went down to his cabin to avoid any further talk. His heart was aching as badly as any on board—aching with an agony beyond words. He was leaving England and Decima forever! Farewell love and all hope in life! Despair stretched darkly before him.

## CHAPTER XXII.

ABOUT an hour after Trevor had stolen from the Prince's Mansions, the parlor maid glanced up at the clock in the kitchen.

"I suppose his lordship isn't coming back to-night, or he'd have told me to get a room ready?" she remarked to the cook, who yawned in sympathy; "and yet he's left his coat."

"Perhaps he's come back and got it," suggested the cook.

"No, or I should have heard him, for I've been listening. I wonder when Mrs. Dalton left? I didn't see her go, and his lordship didn't ring. She and Mr. Deane's sister must have gone together, I suppose. Now there's a pretty girl, if you like, cook! and the image of her brother. We've had quite a lot of visitors to-night," and she laughed.

"Perhaps they're in the drawing-room now?" said the cook.

Jane shook her head.

"No, it's all quiet. I went and listened at the door just now, and, not hearing anyone, I knocked and looked in. There was no one there. I got a start, though," she added, with a smile.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, his lordship had thrown his fur coat on the sofa, and it looked for all the world as if somebody was lying there," replied Jane. She yawned again. "Well, I think we'd better go to bed; it's no use sitting up for Mr. Deane. I expect he's at Cardigan Terrace, and if so he won't be home till the small hours."

"Better see to the drawing-room fire, hadn't you?" said the cook as she turned down the page of her novel; but Jane shook her head.

"Oh, it don't matter. Mr. Deane always goes straight to bed when he comes in; I hear his door shut."

The two women went to bed after a little more talk, and the place was wrapped in silence. Bobby was not an early riser—few young persons are; it is the middle-aged

and the old who find it easier to get up than to lie thinking—and if Bobby got his breakfast by ten o'clock he was quite suited and satisfied. Lord Gaunt's servants had an easy time of it in that respect.

It was past nine when Jane went into the drawing-room to light the fire. The electric lamp was still burning, and she looked over her shoulder and called to the cook.

"Mr. Deane hasn't come in yet," she said. "I wonder where he is?"

The cook grumbled incoherently.

"I suppose I had better get breakfast all the same?" she said. "If I don't he'll come rushing in, and want it all of a hurry. It always happens like that."

Jane laughed, turned out the lamp and drew back the curtains. As she did so, she was conscious of a faint perfume; she knew it very well, for it was the scent that always hung about Mr. Deane's clothes when he had been at Cardigan Terrace. But it was stronger than usual in the room this morning.

She opened the window, and laid and lit the fire, picking up the shattered photograph, then began to sweep the room, but her eyes fell on the costly coat on the sofa.

"I'd better take it into the bedroom," she said to herself, "or it will be smothered with dust. Lor', how careless gentlefolk are of their things!"

A moment afterward a shriek rang through the place, and the cook, rushing into the room whence the cry had proceeded, found her fellow-servant leaning against the table, with the coat at her feet, and her eyes staring at something on the sofa.

"Good heavens, Jane, what is the matter?"

Then she, too, screamed, and the two women stood clinging to each other and staring at the motionless figure with terror in their eyes.

Their cries, repeated again and again, brought the porter and the page into the room, followed by two or three occupants of the other flats; among the latter was a retired army doctor, who, taking in the situation at a glance, pushed his way to the couch and examined the body.

"She is dead!" he said, gravely. "Who are the servants here? Ah! Do you know the lady? Who is she?"

Jane, half fainting, gasped out the name.

"It's Mrs. Dalton—Mr. Thorpe's sister! She came here last night!"

She broke into terrified sobs.

"Alone?" asked the doctor. "But stop—better not answer! Let some one go for the gentleman, Mr. Thorpe. Here, boy, take a cab and bring him!" He thrust the page-boy from the room, and turned to the porter as he did so. "And you go for the police."

In a very short time two policemen were on the scene. They cleared the room and mounted guard beside the body.

"We've sent to Scotland Yard for a detective," one said to the doctor.

He arrived before Morgan Thorpe, and at once, with the *sang froid* of experience, took possession of "the case," and with notebook in hand he was questioning the servants when Morgan Thorpe burst in.

He was white as death, but the pallor increased to lividity as he bent over the body and gazed at the beautiful face, now placid with the rest and peace of death.

"You know her—identify her?" asked the detective. "Of course, I warn you that anything you say—you understand?"

"Yes, she is—is my sister!" said Thorpe, leaning against the table and staring at the dead woman. "My sister, yes!"

"You knew she had come here?"

Thorpe nodded.

"Why did she come here? Whom did she come to see?"

"Deane," replied Thorpe.

In that moment falsehood, evasion, were impossible.

"Deane—who is he?"

"He lives here—in these rooms," said Thorpe. "My God! I thought she was at home—in her room. I came back late last night—from the club—it was early this morning. Her door was closed. I—I thought she was in bed! I went to my room, and—and I was in bed when they fetched me! Who—who has done it? She has been murdered!"

"I'm afraid so," said the detective, grimly. He looked

at the Persian dagger, which lay on the floor as it had dropped from Trevor's hand. "That did it: don't touch it, please," he added, though any of those present would have died rather than do so. "Why did she come here to see Mr. Deane—a lady—alone—you know?"

Thorpe moistened his parched lips.

"For God's sake! give me something—brandy!"

The detective nodded, and the doctor poured out a glass of brandy for Thorpe. He drank it at a draught.

"I'll tell you all I know. She—she—" He shuddered. "She came here to—to get some money from him."

The detective made a note.

"Go on," he said, gravely. "Came to threaten him?"

"No, no—only—only persuade," said Thorpe. "Oh, Laura! Laura!"

The detective turned to the trembling, shrinking servants.

"Where is Mr. Deane?" he asked.

"I—I don't know, sir!" said Jane, with a terrified sob. "He—he hasn't been home all night."

"How do you know that?" demanded the detective, quietly.

The girl looked round with a bewildered air.

"He hasn't—so far as I know."

The detective nodded. His sharp eye had caught the shattered portrait frame, where Jane, all unsuspectingly—she thought that it had been accidentally knocked off the mantel-piece—had placed it on the table. He took it up.

"Portrait of the deceased. Whose is it?"

"Mr.—Mr. Deane's, sir," sobbed Jane. "He—he put it on the mantelshelf the other day."

It all seemed so plain to the shrewd detective. The woman had come to threaten or cajole this Mr. Deane, a quarrel had ensued; the broken portrait, the dagger. It was all quite plain!

"Give me a description of Mr. Deane, will you?" he said.

Thorpe, with his hand to his heart, tried to describe Bobby, and the detective took notes.

"You can go into the kitchen," he said to the servants. "But don't leave the place, please."

"It's quite evident who's to blame here," he said to the army doctor, who stood grave and attentive. "I'll get a warrant for this Mr. Deane."

Thorpe overheard, and looked up with a bewildered expression.

"Deane—Deane did not do it," he said, feebly. "He—he isn't capable of it! Oh, my God! why did I let her come? It isn't Deane!"

But the detective smiled—a superior smile. "His experience had convinced him that, as a rule, there was very little mystery about a murder. It was only in novels that there was any doubt as to the criminal who had committed the deed.

He went to the door of the inner room and tried it.

"Locked," he said to one of the constables. "Go round and see if the key's inside."

The man went round and unlocked the door, and the detective passed through the suite of rooms, noting everything with his sharp eyes, and re-entered the drawing-room by the passage.

"He got off through those rooms," he said to the doctor.

"The—the scoundrel!" he gasped in response. "You—you will be able to get him?"

The detective smiled confidently.

"Oh, yes; crime's too recent for him to escape. I'll have him under the hue and cry in half an hour."

Leaving the policeman in charge, he went back to Scotland Yard, and in a few minutes a fairly accurate description of Bobby was being flashed over the country.

Then the detective, with other officials, returned to the Mansions two hours later. Morgan Thorpe was still there, seated in a chair, his head in his hands. He had finished the decanter of brandy, and was looking half stupefied.

As they entered he looked up in a bewildered fashion.

"Have—have you found him?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"No," said the detective, "but we shall have him presently without a doubt. He can't have got far."

At this moment the door was flung open and Bobby and an elderly man entered in hot haste.

Morgan Thorpe sprang to his feet.

"Deane!" he exclaimed.

The detective stepped behind Bobby and shut the door.

"Mr. Deane, I think?" he said, politely. "I arrest you—"

But Bobby had sprung to the sofa and stood white and shuddering before the white sheet with which they had reverently covered the dead woman.

"It—it is not true!" he cried. "Oh, it can't—it can't be! Thorpe!" he flung his hands out in appeal, "tell me it isn't true!"

Thorpe stared at him.

"She's dead—murdered!" he gasped, with hanging underlip. "Murdered here—last night—in your rooms!"

"My God!" cried Bobby.

The detective laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Mr. Deane, I arrest you on a charge of wilful murder."

Bobby turned his eyes upon him, too stunned to speak; but the elderly gentleman beside him said with agitation:

"There is some mistake. If the poor creature was murdered last night Mr. Deane is certainly not the criminal, for he spent all last evening at my house at Putney; he came to dine, with two other gentlemen—also pupils of mine—and remained the night. I—the other guests, the servants—can prove this."

The detective was staggered.

"She came to see him. She was found covered by your coat;" he indicated the fur coat."

"Mine? No!" said Bobby.

The detective looked round at the servants sharply.

"Whose coat is this?" he asked, sternly.

Jane gasped for breath.

"My master's—Lord—Lord Gaunt's!" she said at last.

The detective frowned.

"When did you see Lord Gaunt last?" he asked quickly.

"Last night—about ten—he passed me in the corridor."

"He was here, then?"

She nodded spasmodically.

"Yes, I let him in."

"Did he wear that coat?"

She nodded and fell to sobbing.

"Yes, he came in it; he left without it; but—but if you think that his lordship did it, you're wrong—wrong. He couldn't!"

The detective turned swiftly upon Morgan Thorpe.

"Did your sister know Lord Gaunt?" he asked.

Morgan Thorpe got up, and steadied himself by the back of the chair.

"My God! it's no use keeping it back!" he said, as if to himself: "Gentlemen, my poor sister—was Lord Gaunt's wife!"

"His wife! You described her as Mrs. Dalton."

"She was his wife!" said Thorpe, with a kind of dogged sullenness. "They—they were separated. He left her. They must have met by accident here last night."

One of the Scotland Yard officials drew the detective aside.

"You've made a mistake this time," he said, in a low voice. "The man you want is this Lord Gaunt! Hurry up! You've lost a lot of time as it is."

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### CHAPTER XXIII.

THE detective was staggered, and looked round rather sullenly. His professional reputation was a high one, and he felt his mistake acutely.

"What hotel does Lord Gaunt use?" he asked of the servant.

"He always goes to Morlet's when the rooms are being done up, or he can't sleep here for any reason," said Jane, weeping. "But it isn't his lordship—"

The detective left the room and got into a cab.

"Lord Gaunt in?" he inquired, carelessly, of Wilkins.

"His lordship left us early this morning, sir," was the reply.

The detective had quite expected this answer.

"Do you know where I can find him?" he inquired as carelessly.

Wilkins looked surprised.

"His lordship left for Africa this morning," he said. "The vessel must have started by this time. We sent

his lordship's luggage on yesterday—to the Pevensey Castle."

The detective nodded and bit his lip. Then he stood for a moment pondering. Surely Lord Gaunt would not have been such a fool as to shut himself up in a vessel which could be stopped by a cable at Madeira!

"Went in a cab, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, sir; a hansom. His lordship only had a bag."

"Just so. Did you happen to hear what direction he gave the cabman? I've got important business with his lordship and want to catch him before he starts, if I can."

"He said, 'Charing Cross Station,'" said Wilkins. "I happened to hear him."

The detective's face cleared. Of course! Gaunt would leave his luggage to go by the Cape vessel and himself make for the Continent. The detective saw the move in an instant.

"Thanks!" he said, and he jumped into his cab and was driven to Charing Cross. There he wired a description of Lord Gaunt to the police at Southampton and Dover and instructed them to stop him. A Continental train happened to be due, and the detective, pretty well assured that he was on the track of the fugitive, went down to Dover by it.

The Southampton telegram arrived exactly one hour after the Pevensey Castle had sailed.

Meanwhile the police at the Mansions were gathering information from the servants and other persons; and very soon the fact of Decima's visit on the previous evening came out.

Bobby was amazed and horrified.

"Yes, she is my sister," he said. "She must have come to see me, as Jane says. She could not have come to meet Lord Gaunt!" for the inspector had ventured to suggest this.

"Where should we be likely to find Miss Deane?" he asked, significantly.

Bobby shook his head. He was confused and bewildered.

"She may be with her aunt, Lady Pauline Lascelles, or she may have gone back home. I cannot understand! I will go round to Lady Pauline's."

The inspector nodded.

"One of my men will go round with you," he said, gravely.

Bobby started.

"You—you don't think—you don't dare to suspect my sister"—he began; and the inspector responded quietly:

"Well, the young lady was here last night, Mr. Deane. I will ask you to see that she does not leave London just yet. She will be sure to be wanted, you see."

Bobby went round to Berkeley Square accompanied by a detective, and Lady Pauline came down to the drawing-room to them.

"A terrible thing has happened, Lady Pauline," said Bobby, whose white face and quivering lips had startled her. "—A lady has been found dead—murdered—in my—that is, Lord Gaunt's—rooms; and—and—is Decima here?"

"Yes, she is here," said Lady Pauline, gravely. "She is very ill with brain fever."

Bobby uttered an exclamation.

"I must see her, Lady Pauline. I must! They say—it is said—that she was at my rooms last night, and—and—"

Lady Pauline's strength of mind came to her aid.

"In the rooms where this poor lady has been found?" she said. "Yes, I know that she went to your rooms; the woman in charge of the house told me so. But—" she stopped, struck silent by the expression of Bobby's face.

"Tell me all you know," she said, gravely and calmly.

Bobby, in hurried and agitated accents, told all that he knew.

"It is dreadful to think, to suggest, that Decima is mixed up in this!" he said. "She cannot possibly know anything about it. Oh, let me see her!"

"You may see her," said Lady Pauline, "but you cannot learn anything from her. She is quite unconscious. Here is the doctor." She heard his step coming down the stairs, and called him in.

"Miss Deane is ill, very ill," he said, quietly. "She may remain unconscious for some time, possibly for days. You may see her, yes; you can do no harm."

Bobby went up and stood and gazed at the white face with the staring eyes ; then he came down again, and looked helplessly round him.

" We may as well go, sir," said the detective. " Lady Pauline will let us know when Miss Deane is well enough to be asked any questions."

They returned to Prince's Mansions, and the detective made his report to the inspector. He nodded gravely and drew Bobby aside.

" Miss Deane will be an important witness," he said. " I may as well tell you, Mr. Deane—mind, I don't speak officially—that we do not suspect Miss Deane ! "

" Suspect ! " exclaimed Bobby, indignantly.

The inspector raised his eyebrows.

" Well, she was here, you see ; and any one present in these rooms last night might fall under suspicion ; but it seems to me that the case against Lord Gaunt is as clear as noonday."

" Lord Gaunt ! " said Bobby, chokingly. " He is incapable of it."

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

" That's what one so often thinks," he said. " However, we shall soon see. Our man will have overtaken him by this time, I should think."

They had removed the body, but Morgan Thorpe had still lingered. The shock and the brandy he had consumed had rendered him a pitiable spectacle.

" Come—come home with me ! Don't leave me alone, Deane, for God's sake ! " he said, clutching at Bobby's arm and quite forgetting his recent plot to rob him.

" I will see you home," said Bobby, passing his hand across his brow. " I don't know what to do—where to turn. I ought to go home and tell my father of all this—not that it would be of any use ! —but I can't leave my sister. Yes, I will go home with you."

They went to Cardigan Terrace and Bobby looked round the familiar room with a shudder ; he could almost see the small, exquisitely dressed figure sitting at the piano.

There was a letter on the mantel shelf, and Morgan Thorpe took it up, and opened the envelope with shaking fingers. But he was incapable of reading it and he held it out to Bobby.

"Read it, Deane," he said, and he made for the liquor stand on the sideboard.

"It is from Trevor," said Bobby, and he read the note aloud;

"DEAR THORPE:—I feel played out and shall run over to the Continent for a change; may stay some time. I was sorry to hear that Mrs. Dalton had a bad headache when I called to say 'good-by.' I am starting in half an hour. I packed this morning. Always do things suddenly, don't I? Remember me to Deane and all the rest. Yours,

"RALPH TREVOR."

Thorpe moaned in a maudlin way. "Poor old Trevor! He will be awfully cut up when he hears of—of it! He was very fond of her, Deane! My poor Laura!" He drew the hand which held the tumbler of brandy-and-soda across his eyes. "I can't realize it yet! What a loss for me! She was so—so clever! I shall never get on without her! So Trevor's gone! It seems as if everybody had gone! You'll stand by me, Deane. You—you may hear all sorts of things about me, but you—you won't believe them, Deane! I've always had a liking for you, my dear boy, always ——"

"Better not drink any more," said Bobby; but Thorpe shook his head.

"It's the only thing that will keep me up! To think that Laura's dead; butchered—and by that beast, Gaunt! I always hated him. A stuck-up, sneering beast! Yes, I always hated him, and so did she!"

"And they were married?" said Bobby, with a sharp pang of remorse for his own folly.

Thorpe nodded.

"Yes; don't bear any malice, because I kept it from you, dear boy. It was her secret, not mine, and she was so sensitive! My poor Laura! But he shall hang for it! He shall hang for it!"

Bobby shuddered.

"I don't believe he did it, I can't!" he said. "I know Gaunt. As I've said a score of times, he isn't capable of it. It's just that. Some things are impossible to some men, and—and murder is impossible to Lord Gaunt!"

"Then who did it?" demanded Thorpe, with a hic-

cough. "Tell me that! Isn't the evidence against him as strong as can be!"

Bobby shook his head. The evidence might be as strong as it could be, and yet it did not convince him.

After he had seen Thorpe led away to bed—speechlessly drunk—he left the house. The subtle, familiar perfume in the room seemed to follow him, and the dead woman's face and voice haunted him.

On his way to Lady Pauline's he bought the second edition of an evening paper—no evening paper ever owns to a first edition—and, while he waited in the drawing-room, read the account. "The Tragedy at Prince's Mansions!" it was headed, and there were "scare" lines at intervals of the report.

His heart sank as he read the smooth and yet graphic statement.

The murdered woman was, as it set forth, the wife of Lord Gaunt. Here followed all his names and titles. He had married her, with a suppression of his rank, and had, very soon after the ceremony, which had taken place in Switzerland, separated from her, going on the travels which had made him, with a certain section of the public, famous. The deceased lady had gone to his rooms—whether by appointment or not, the report could not say—and it was proved by the statement of the servants that she had met Lord Gaunt in these rooms. Lord Gaunt had been seen to leave them without his overcoat; the murdered woman had been found lying dead on the couch, and covered by this same overcoat. The antique dagger with which the deed had been committed had been found lying near the body. Lord Gaunt had disappeared.

This in brief was the substance of the account, although the full report occupied nearly a page of the paper.

Well might Bobby's heart sink as he read it. His own name, and—alas and alas!—Decima's, occurred several times. He stifled a groan and crammed the paper into his pocket as Lady Pauline entered.

"Decima is still unconscious!" she said. She was calm and self-possessed, with the calmness and self-possession of Christian fortitude. "The doctor says she may—may live, but that it will be some time before she will be able to tell us anything. Is there any later news?"

Bobby produced the paper.

"Yes: I have read it. I know—or, rather, I know of—Lord Gaunt. I am not surprised to hear that he is married; nothing I could hear of him would surprise me; but I do not think that he is guilty—"

"He is not! He is not!" said Bobby.

Lady Pauline regarded him coldly.

"And you knew this unfortunate woman?" she said. Bobby hung his head.

"I will not reproach you, but if I may say a word in season"—

"There's no need," said poor Bobby. "I'm punished badly enough as it is. All my thoughts are of Decima. To think that she is mixed up in this!"

Lady Pauline inclined her head gravely.

"Who is Mr. Mershon?" she asked.

Bobby started.

"Mr. Mershon! He is the man—Decima is engaged to," he said.

"Please write to him that I wish to see him," said Lady Pauline. "You would like to see her? She will not know you; she is quite unconscious."

Bobby went up to Decima's room, and gazed at her piteously, as he had done before.

As he left the house the special editions of the evening papers were being bawled through the streets and the rau-  
cous voices of the newspaper boys were shouting, "Orrible  
murder! Tragedy in 'igh life!"

All England was ringing with the news of the murder, and the consternation and excitement in Loamshire, and round about Leafmore, especially, were intense. Crowds gathered round the gates of Leafmore and stared up the avenue—Heaven alone knows why!—as if they expected to glean something of the grim tragedy from a glimpse of the house.

Bobby had wired to Bright, and he had dashed off with the news to Mershon, to beg him to help break it to Mr. Deane.

Mershon was startled, but more indignant at Decima's connection with the affair than horrified at the tragedy itself.

"Always thought there was something queer about

Lord Gaunt," he said. "Yes, he's just the man to shoot or stab his wife if he didn't like her—I beg your pardon," for Bright had reddened and exclaimed indignantly. "Of course you think he's innocent?"

"How could I think otherwise?" said Bright, warmly. "Lord Gaunt is not guilty!"

"All right," said Mershon, grimly, and with a shrug of his shoulders. "To tell you the truth, I don't very much care whether he is or whether he isn't—of course, I hope he isn't; what I'm thinking about is Decima—Miss Deane. What I want to know is: Why did she bolt up to town and why did she go round to his rooms?"

"Miss Deane went to see her brother, I imagine," said Bright. "She could not know that Lord Gaunt would be there—that he was in London. None of us—not even I—have known anything of his movements. It is terrible that Miss Deane's name should appear in the affair."

"I should think so," said Mershon, moodily. "It's jolly hard on me, I know!"

"I am going round to Mr. Deane to tell him," said Bright. "Will you come with me? I shall go straight from there to London, of course. Lord Gaunt will want me, and if he did not——"

"I'll go with you," said Mershon.

He accompanied Bright, and ordered the carriage to follow them to the Woodbines.

They found Mr. Deane in the laboratory, and broke the news. He was startled but by no means overwhelmed, though distressed in a confused and bewildered way at the fact that Decima was concerned in the matter and was ill.

"I am thankful she is with Lady Pauline," he said. "It—it would be of little use my going up to her——"

He glanced wistfully at the ridiculous model he was at work upon.

"No, no," said Mershon, gnawing at his cigar. "I'm going; you'd better leave it to me. The old fool doesn't realize it," he said to Bright, as they passed out. "He doesn't see that this will bring a lot of scandal upon my head."

The following morning Mershon presented himself at Lady Pauline's.

Her first thought as she looked at him was, "How does it happen that Decima—my Decima—is engaged to this man!" For Mr. Mershon, pale and sullen with anxiety and resentment at the state of things, was not prepossessing, and Lady Pauline's cold and stately manner of receiving him did not tend to put him at his ease.

"My niece is very ill, Mr. Mershon," she said, as she motioned him to a chair; "very ill, indeed. But you have, no doubt, been informed?"

"It she too ill to see me?" he broke in.

"Much too ill," replied Lady Pauline, "and—I think it best to be quite candid, Mr. Mershon—even if she were well enough, I do not think the interview would be desirable."

"Not—not desirable?" he repeated, staring at her. "Why—why, she's engaged to me!"

"She was, so she has informed me," said Lady Pauline.

"Was!" echoed Mershon. "What do you mean? I don't understand!"

"I am glad you have come to see me so soon," she said. "It is only right that you should know, at the earliest possible moment, that my niece desires to withdraw from her engagement to you, Mr. Mershon."

Mershon started from his chair and reddened.

"Wants to—to break it off!" he said, huskily. "Why? Why should she want to break it off?"

With her usual directness and strict regard for truth, Lady Pauline answered, gravely:

"My niece does not love you."

Mershon's pallor was startling. Then he laughed uneasily.

"I think I understand!" he said. "She—she thinks this scandal—that I shall be angry and cut up about it. Well, so I am, but it won't make any difference to me, of course. I don't like it; no man would like to have his future wife mixed up with such an awful business as this; and—and some fellows would want to draw back; but I'm not that kind of a man. Tell Decie that I stand by my word; yes, that I say that even now, when I don't know why she went to Gaunt's rooms, or whether she expected to see him or not. Just tell her that, Lady Pauline."

Lady Pauline rose. The man's vulgarity and meanness simply amazed her. Why—why had Decima promised to marry a person who was not even a gentleman?

"I will tell my niece what you say, certainly," she said. "But it may be some time before she is well enough to receive your message, and I think I may assure you that it will not have the effect upon her which you expect and desire. She will not marry you, Mr. Mershon."

He reddened and plucked at his gloves.

"She—she was off her head—she didn't know what she was saying when she told you she wanted to break off the engagement," he stammered.

"On the contrary, she was quite conscious, and her words were perfectly lucid and final," said Lady Pauline. "I fear I cannot remain away from her any longer, Mr. Mershon."

She rose and Mershon, almost too furious to mutter the conventional adieu, left the house.

Had there been anything between Decima and Gaunt? he asked himself. His jealousy rose and tore at him vulture fashion as he thought of Gaunt's and Decima's friendship, of the way in which she had helped to restore the Hall, and carry out Bright's plans. And then, she had come up to London all of a sudden, and had gone to Gaunt's rooms! A fierce hatred and suspicion of Gaunt took possession of him.

He went straight to his lawyer—a sharp city attorney, who had acted for Mershon in many risky cases.

"Terrible affair this, Mr. Mershon," he began, for he knew of Mershon's engagement to Miss Deane, who was mixed up in the "Murder in Prince's Mansions," and he suspected that Mershon had come to consult him, and he was right.

"Yes," said Mershon, abruptly. "Look here, Gilsby; I'm in this, after a fashion. I want you to act for me. Of course this fellow, Lord Gaunt, is the murderer."

Mr. Gilsby looked rather startled.

"Well—the evidence——"

"Is enough to hang any man," broke in Mershon. "When's the inquest?"

"To-morrow, I should imagine; I can ascertain."

"Do so. And see here, brief one of the sharpest com-

mon-law barristers ; get the best Old Bailey man you can ; let him represent me at the inquest."

Mr. Gilsby nodded and waited.

"If that man Gaunt did it he ought not to get off," continued Mershon, avoiding the lawyer's eyes. "He's a swell, a 'noble lord,' and all that, and they—his friends—will move heaven and earth to get him off. Now, I say that it would be a miscarriage of justice if they succeeded. A man who'd stab a woman in cold blood is—er—er—ought to be hanged."

"Certainly, certainly !" assented Mr. Gilsby. "But you need have no fear, Mr. Mershon ; the Treasury will prosecute—"

"I know all that, d——n it !" broke in Mershon, fiercely. "But I want to help. Get the best man you can, and let him appear at the inquest, and—and see that there's no attempt to hoodwink and bamboozle the jury. See ?"

The sharp city attorney did see. He nodded, and rang a bell.

"Boskett is your man, Mr. Mershon," he said, quietly. "I'll brief him. And you think Lord Gaunt is guilty ?"

"I'm sure of it," snapped Mershon. "I'm staying at the Grand," he added, as he flung on his hat and left the office.

Mr. Gilsby looked at the closed door thoughtfully. It opened again suddenly and Mr. Mershon once more strode in.

"You've got all those bills of Mr. Deane's, haven't you ?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Right. I may want to recover on them. May want to do so all in a hurry. If I wire 'Act,' you'll drop down on Deane. See ?"

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

THE inquest was held on the following day. The room was crowded with lawyers, reporters, and as many of the curious public which could force and squeeze their way in. Not for many years had so sensational and "in-

teresting" a murder been committed, and the world was watching the development of events, and waiting for every detail, with an eagerness which even the most enterprising of the newspapers could not satisfy. And some of them, it must be admitted, had done their best. Short and charmingly inaccurate biographies of Lord Gaunt had appeared, together with portraits hideously unlike him.

Some of the sketches of his life represented him as a man who had spent most of his days in the society of savages, and was therefore just the man to commit a peculiarly ferocious murder.

Bobby and Bright had almost to fight their way into the room, and it was some minutes before they could reach the solicitor's table, where Mr. Pelford, the head of the firm of Gaunt's lawyers, was sitting beside the famous counsel, Sir James Letson, whom Pelford & Lang had retained.

Mr. Pelford nodded to Bright.

"We've got Sir James, you see, Mr. Bright," he said, in a hurried undertone. "And everything will be done that can be done for Lord Gaunt; but"—he shook his head gravely—"the case looks very bad. Do you see that Mr. Boskett is here?" he glanced toward that eminent gentleman. "He appears for Miss Deane."

Bobby started.

"I—I did not engage him," he said. "I never thought of it!"

"He is instructed by Mr. Gilsby," said Mr. Pelford, in rather a dry voice. "He is Mr. Mershon's solicitor. Mr. Mershon is just behind that partition—you cannot see him from here. Yes, the case looks serious but— Well, Sir James will do all that can be done, rest assured."

After the usual preliminaries, the police began to call their witnesses, and as one after the other appeared and told his or her story Mr. Bright's anxious face grew more anxious and careworn. Brick by brick, as it were, the solicitor for the Treasury was building up the case against Lord Gaunt.

First came the page, who told how he had let in, first, Miss Deane; then Jane, who had admitted Lord Gaunt and the deceased.

"Is Miss Deane here?" asked the coroner.

Mr. Boskett rose with the leisurely air which masked his terrible keenness.

"I appear for Miss Deane, sir," he said.

"I doubt your *locus standi*," interrupted the coroner, "but go on."

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Boskett. "I have at present only to state that Miss Deane is very ill, and quite unable to be here. She is, in fact, unconscious, and I produce the doctor's certificate."

He handed it in and sat down. The coroner read it and nodded gravely for the witness to proceed.

Jane told her story very well. She had taken tea in for Miss Deane, and she had not seen her since. She was there in the room when Lord Gaunt had entered, and Jane had heard their voices talking together. Then the deceased had arrived. No, she did not usher her into the drawing-room. The lady inquired for Mr. Deane, and, on being told that he was not in, she had said she would go and sit down and wait for him, and as she knew the way, Jane need not trouble. She had not seen the deceased and Lord Gaunt together, but she had heard them talking, and once—here she hesitated, but only for a moment—they were speaking so loudly, there was a kind of cry—that she knocked at the door, thinking she was called.

She had not entered. A little later—it might have been half an hour—Lord Gaunt had come down the corridor from one of the other rooms, and passed her, on his way out. She was talking to the porter in the lift. Lord Gaunt had no overcoat. She had felt ashamed at being caught gossiping, and had run away into the kitchen. No one else came that night. They waited for Mr. Deane until past eleven, then went to bed. She had looked into the room to see to the fire, but had not noticed any one there, or seen anything unusual. In the morning she found the deceased lying on the couch as the doctor had described. She was dead, there was a wound above her heart, and the dagger which the policeman showed her now was lying on the floor. The portrait was lying smashed in the fireplace. The deceased was covered by a fur coat. Yes, it was the master's, Lord Gaunt; but

she was certain, quite, quite certain, that he could not have done it!

The coroner stopped her with uplifted hand. The solicitor for the Treasury asked a few questions of small details, and then Sir James rose.

"You heard no cry for help, no screaming or shrieking?"

"No, sir! Only the poor lady talking loudly. Lord Gaunt's voice was quiet like."

"The deceased asked for Mr. Deane?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever seen the deceased before?"

"Oh, yes," said Jane. "She had dined with Mr. Deane at a dinner party, with Mr. Thorpe and Mr. Trevor." No, she had never before seen Lord Gaunt with the deceased. Did not know that he was married—didn't quite believe it even now.

Mr. Boskett got up, and in the softest and blandest of voices, asked :

"Now, will you tell us—don't be afraid!—you heard voices at various times that evening? Did you hear Miss Deane's voice after—mind, after—the deceased had entered the room?"

"No," said Jane. "There were only two voices after that, the deceased's and Lord Gaunt's."

"And you did not see Miss Deane leave the Mansions? She might have left a few minutes after the deceased had entered?"

"Yes, sir. I think she must, because I didn't see her go afterward, and, of course, I was waiting to be rung for to let the visitors out as usual."

"And Miss Deane asked for her brother, and not for Lord Gaunt?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I'm sure the young lady doesn't know anything about it. She is the sweetest—"

The coroner stopped her again, and Mr. Boskett, with an encouraging smile, and a glance at the jury, murmured audibly :

"No one suspects her!"

Then aloud he said :

"Now, tell me. You found the inner door of the drawing-room locked? On the bedroom side?"

"Yes, sir."

"And no one entered the drawing-room, so far as you know, after the deceased? You must have heard them—"

Sir James rose.

"Really, that is scarcely a fair question!" he said.

"We want all the information we can get," remarked Mr. Boskett, blandly.

The coroner nodded and Jane said:

"No; no one had come in afterwards."

"And now, did you notice anything peculiar in Lord Gaunt's manner when he passed you in the corridor on his way out?"

Jane hesitated.

"His lordship looked upset and—and worried, sir."

"Anything peculiar about his dress? Think."

"She knows something," whispered Mr. Pelford to Sir James.

Sir James did not move a muscle. Jane hesitated and looked distressed.

"Come, speak out," said Mr. Boskett, gently and persuasively, and Jane, with a kind of sob, said:

"There—there was blood on his wristband."

A thrill ran through the crowd. Mr. Boskett glanced at the jury in a casual kind of way.

The porter was next called, and gave his evidence clearly. So far as he knew, no one had entered Lord Gaunt's flat after the deceased.

Yes; Lord Gaunt had looked haggard and upset, and he, the porter, had noticed the blood stain on the wristband.

So also had Wilkins, the butler, from Merlet's. He carried the grim story a point further by telling how he had sent on the luggage to Southampton, but had heard Lord Gaunt, when leaving in the morning, direct the cabman to drive to Charing Cross. Had remarked that Lord Gaunt did not wear his fur coat when he returned the preceding night, and had been informed by Lord Gaunt that he had left it at his club.

The crowd exchanged glances and murmured significantly.

Then Mr. Morgan Thorpe was called. He was a pit-

eous spectacle. His usually pleasant and youthful face was haggard and drawn ; his eyelids were swollen, and his lips tremulous and pale. He had been drinking, but not enough to steady his shaking hands and voice. As he raised his eyes and glanced round the court with a shrinking look, Bobby could scarcely believe that it was the same man who only a few days ago had swaggered and rifled it with such self-assurance. Every answer had to be dragged out of him. Yes, the deceased was his sister. She was married secretly to Lord Gaunt, who married her under the name of Barnard. Had not known Barnard's real name and title. His sister and her husband had separated soon after the marriage, and she had lived with him, the brother, since that time. Her husband had disappeared, quite disappeared. She had not seen him to his, Morgan Thorpe's knowledge, between the hour of their parting and the night of the murder——

Sir James looked up.

“ Do not use the word ‘murder,’ Mr. Thorpe,” he said sharply ; “ the jury have not yet given their verdict.”

Morgan Thorpe glared at him resentfully.

“ It was murder—foul and cowardly murder——”

“ Silence ! ” said the coroner, sternly. “ Confine yourself to a statement of what you actually know.”

Sir James rose.

“ You say, Mr. Thorpe, that so far as you are aware your sister did not know the whereabouts of Lord Gaunt ? ”

“ She did not—I swear it.”

“ You knew she was going to Prince’s Mansions the night of the 6th ? ”

Thorpe hesitated. Could he venture to deny it ? As he paused, Sir James carelessly picked up a blue paper from the table, and Morgan Thorpe’s eyes dropped.

“ I knew it.”

Sir James handed him the bill.

“ This was found in the pocket of the deceased. It is a bill, unsigned, for two hundred pounds. Can you explain it ? ”

Thorpe glanced at Bobby, and his face went white.

“ My—my poor sister was in want of money. She—she thought Mr. Deane would lend it to her——”

His voice grew inaudible. Bobby hung his head as every eye in court was directed to him.

"May I take it that you sent her on this errand?" said Sir James.

Morgan Thorpe raised his head and stared at him insolently.

"You may take it as you please," he said, defiantly.

"That is sufficient," said Sir James, gravely.

Mr. Boskett rose.

"One moment, Mr. Thorpe. Were you aware of the real name and rank of the deceased's husband? Oh, don't hesitate, please!" he added, with the first note of sharpness in his voice, and Thorpe nodded.

"Yes? And you kept your knowledge from your sister?"

Thorpe looked round like a hunted animal seeking for some means of escape.

"I—I did. I thought it best."

Mr. Boskett turned his glittering eyes upon him.

"Did not Lord Gaunt undertake to pay you a sum of money to keep his identity secret? Answer, please."

The reply was scarcely audible.

"Good. Now, Mr. Thorpe, you remember a certain scandal in Paris in the summer of 18—. A scandal in which a lady was concerned. Was not that lady your sister?"

"Yes," said Morgan Thorpe, and Mr. Boskett turned to the jury.

"I regret to have to allude to this matter, but I desire to show the cause of Lord Gaunt's desertion of his wife—"

"Not desertion!" said Sir James, quickly.

"Separation, if you like!" said Mr. Boskett. "In a word, Mr. Thorpe, did not Lord Gaunt separate from his wife because he discovered certain facts in connection with her life before her marriage?"

Morgan Thorpe moistened his lips.

"If any one has been saying—" he began, but the coroner interrupted him.

"Painful as this question must be to you, Mr. Thorpe, you must answer it."

"Well, yes—so he said," replied Thorpe.

"And these facts you concealed from him? Did you conceal from him this other fact, that you had suffered three months' imprisonment for fraud, committed two years before you made his acquaintance?"

"Where did he get all this?" asked Sir James, testily, of Mr. Pelford, while the court was waiting on Thorpe's reply.

"If I am to submit to have all my past life raked up for the amusement of a crowd—" panted Morgan Thorpe.

"Answer, sir!" said the coroner, sternly, and Thorpe's livid lips formed the "Yes."

"Did you conceal the identity of her husband and his whereabouts from the deceased because you feared his violence if they should meet?" asked Mr. Boskett, in gentle tones.

It was scarcely a permissible question, and Sir James was on his feet in a moment, but Thorpe had got his answer out before he could be stopped.

"Yes: I did!" he said, with a suppressed eagerness. "Gaunt was a violent man. One of the hottest-tempered men I have ever met. I wanted to protect my poor sister—"

The coroner stopped him, but it was too late. The jury had got the impression Mr. Boskett had desired to give them.

"I have finished with you," he said, with that air of satisfaction which a clever counsel can make so telling.

One or two other witnesses were called, and the two doctors who had been summoned after the discovery of the body were recalled by Mr. Boskett.

"I wish to ask these gentleman a question, sir," he said to the coroner. "The young lady, Miss Deane, who is now, I regret to say, lying unconscious, and seriously ill, is unfortunately connected with this case by one of those accidents to which we are all liable. I do not think that the slightest suspicion has been directed toward her; but, nevertheless—perhaps because I feel it my duty to protect her from any future suspicion—I desire to ask a question on her behalf. I ask you, sir," he turned to the first doctor, "if, in your opinion, it would be possible for a young girl to have lifted and placed the body on the couch, as it was discovered?"

"No, certainly not," was the reply, and the second doctor repeated the answer.

Then the coroner wound up, and, as with the skill of experience he linked the evidence together, Bright and Bobby felt as if a chain were being wound round Gaunt. The crowd listened with breathless attention to every word, and when he had finished, turned their eyes upon the jury with hungry impatience.

The jury did not leave the box, but gathered together, and whispered for a few moments, then pronounced the verdict.

They found "Edward Barnard Gaunt, Earl of Gaunt, guilty of the wilful murder of his wife Laura."

Mr. Bright rose, white and trembling; Bobby let his head fall in his hands. Some one touched him on the arm, and, looking up, he saw Mershon beside him. He was pale, save for a red spot on each cheek, and his small eyes shone vindictively.

"A clear case," he said, with a note of satisfaction in his thin voice. "He did it right enough. And they'll have him presently. They've cabled to stop the ship at the Canaries."

Bobby shrank from him with a look of horror.

"I—I don't believe it," he said, his voice breaking. "Gaunt is as innocent as—as I am."

Mershon shrugged his shoulders.

"All right! Let him come home and prove it!" he said, sullenly.

He went over to Mr. Gilsby, who was talking to Mr. Boskett—Mr. Boskett cheerfully triumphant—and clutched him nervously by the arm.

"They'll get him, eh, Gilsby? He can't escape, can he?"

Mr. Gilsby smiled reassuringly.

"Oh, no, certainly not. Quite impossible. You may make your mind easy on that point, Mr. Mershon. They'll bring him back in a few days."

Mershon drew a breath of satisfaction, and hurried out of court.

Mr. Boskett glanced after him, and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Mr. Gilsby smiled.

"Both fond of this Miss Deane," he said answering the unspoken question. "You'll bitterly disappoint my client if you fail to get a conviction, Mr. Boskett. But that's a certainty, I suppose?"

Mr. Boskett only smiled in reply.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

THE Pevensey Castle went on her way. There were a number of passengers, and the usual amusements and entertainments were arranged and successfully carried out; and there was a good deal of laughter and merry-making on board the big ship.

But Gaunt took no part in the quoit playing, the concerts or the dances. He craved for solitude, and he avoided his fellow-passengers and spent most of his time in solitary pacing of the least frequented part of the deck or shut up in his cabin.

It seemed to him as if his heart would never cease to ache with the longing for the girl-love whom he had so nearly wronged, and whom he should never see again. Decima was always before him, always in his thought, and as he imagined—and he could so easily picture it!—her sorrow and horror at his conduct, he felt almost too wretched to live.

And yet he had not sinned wilfully. He had gone to Scotland to avoid her; he had been on his way to Africa to put a still greater distance between them, when Fate had led her to his rooms!

There was one other passenger who took no part in the pastimes of the vessel—this was Mr. Jackson.

He, like Gaunt, spent his time pacing the deck, but in another part than that which Gaunt so restlessly trod. But when down below Mr. Jackson did not confine himself to his cabin, though he spent some time there. He was very often in the smoking saloon, or in the purser's canteen; and there was always a glass of champagne or brandy-and-soda before him. He drank a great deal, but he was never intoxicated; indeed, liquor seemed to take little or no effect upon him.

For some days he avoided his fellow-passengers, only

speaking when he was obliged, and then only in monosyllables. People on board a ship are always curious about their fellow-voyagers, and there was a general idea that Mr. Jackson had lost all his money in Africa ; but this idea was dropped when Mr. Jackson one evening joined the inevitable card party, and took a hand at poker.

He played every night ; indeed, whenever play was going on, and he did not seem to care how high the stakes were. Nor did he seem to care very much whether he won or lost.

It cannot be said that he added much to the geniality of the party, for he rarely spoke, and never laughed or even smiled. The other players regarded him rather curiously, and with a certain amount of doubt, for there was something peculiar and uncanny about his manner and appearance. His face was so unnaturally pale, his eyes so unpleasantly red and bloodshot, and he had a singular trick of looking up suddenly in the midst of a game with a vacant stare, as if he were seeing something, or hearing something, that was not perceptible to the others, and once or twice he had laid down his cards and risen from his chair as if he had forgotten that the game was in progress.

"Our friend, Mr. Jackson, has something on his mind," remarked one of the players one evening, after Jackson had left the saloon. He had walked out with a perfectly unmoved countenance, as impassive as a stone mask, though he had won a considerable sum.

"It's drink, I think," said another. "He drinks like a fish. Why, how many glasses do you think he's put down while he's been sitting here?"

"And the extraordinary thing is that it never seems to have any effect on him," remarked a third. "Why, most of us would have been under the table if we had drunk half that young fellow has mopped up! You meet some queer characters on board a ship, don't you?"

Now and again Gaunt met or came across Mr. Jackson and Jackson would always eye him sideways and give him a nod, which Gaunt returned in an absent-minded way. One evening Gaunt was pacing up and down on his favorite part of the deck, thinking, of course, of Decima, when he saw Jackson coming toward him. The moon

was shining brightly, and Gaunt could see the young fellow's face quite plainly. It was working spasmodically; the lips were moving as if he were talking to himself, and his hands were clenched at his side. Gaunt stopped, half mechanically, and in the shadow of a deckhouse absently watched the man.

Jackson brought up his walk within a few yards of Gaunt, and, leaning over the vessel's side, stared out to sea with bloodshot eyes. Suddenly he put one foot on the gunwale, then, clinging with his hand to a stanchion, drew up the other foot and stood in imminent danger of falling over.

It looked to Gaunt as if the man were meditating suicide, and Gaunt sprang forward, seized him by the arm and dragged him down to the deck.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Mr. Jackson eyed him vacantly for a moment, then he said, without a smile:

"I wanted to see if I could stand there without falling over."

"Rather a dangerous experiment, wasn't it?" said Gaunt.

Jackson looked up at him with a kind of sullen defiance.

"Anyhow, it's no business of yours!" he said.

Gaunt smiled grimly.

"I suppose not," he said. "But I am not sure. If I had allowed you to fall over, you would in all probability have been drowned, and I should have been accessory to your suicide. I might have been charged with your murder."

At the word "murder" Mr. Jackson started and shuddered, and looked at Gaunt with a half-suspicious, half-angry stare.

"What do you mean by that?" he said.

"Exactly what I say," said Gaunt.

He saw that the young fellow had been drinking, and a kind of pity stole into Gaunt's breast; his own sorrow made him very tender toward the weakness and folly of his fellow-men.

"Better go down to your cabin," he said, "and don't drink any more to-night."

"I'm not drunk," said Jackson, sullenly.

"No, but you've had enough," said Gaunt.

There was a touch of sympathy in his tone, which appeared to affect the young fellow.

"I'm devilish wretched," he said.

"My dear fellow," remarked Gaunt, "if all the men who were 'devilish wretched' flung themselves into the sea, how many passengers do you think would remain on board the *Pevensey Castle*?"

Jackson looked at him curiously.

"You don't look particularly cheerful," he said.

Gaunt froze instantly.

"Better go down to your cabin," he said. "I will see you down."

"Oh, it's all right," said Jackson, with a distortion of the lips which might pass for a smile. "I sha'n't try the experiment again."

"Don't!" said Gaunt, quietly. "Nothing in this world is so bad that it might not be worse."

"That's a lie!" remarked Jackson, laconically.

Gaunt made no response, but accompanied the young fellow as far as the saloon stairs, and waited until he had entered his cabin.

The next morning Mr. Jackson passed him on deck with a casual kind of nod. But after Gaunt had passed, Jackson looked after him with a curious expression on his face.

There were a half-dozen children on board, and though Gaunt had avoided his fellow-passengers some of these children had not so much attracted his attention, but forced themselves upon it, for there was something about Gaunt which exerted a magnetic influence upon animals and children. Decima had felt it that first day of meeting him at the Zoo.

One little girl, a pale-faced little thing, whose mother was taking her to Africa in the hope of snatching her from the Demon Consumption, had on several occasions contrived to attract his attention, and once or twice Gaunt had stopped in his pacing and spoken to her; and the child had looked so pleased that he had got into the habit of pausing beside her deck-chair and talking to her about the ship's log, the absence of any toys on board, her own complicated ailments. He would draw the wool

shawl across her chest, or carry her and the chair bodily into the sun and out of the wind. He rarely spoke to the mother, who was rather afraid of the grim-looking gentleman, but Maude did not share her mother's fear and shyness, and talked to Gaunt with the frankness of childish innocence.

Gaunt loved all children, and the child's liking for him brought him some kind of consolation in his misery. There was a look—or he fancied there was a look—in her pale face which reminded him of Decima. Perhaps, he thought, Decima looked like that when she was a child. He knew, as well as the ship's doctor knew, that the little one was doomed, and his heart was full of sympathy for the anxious mother. The child told him all about herself, and often plied him with questions about himself.

"Why do you always walk about alone?" she asked, one evening.

"Well, I like it," he said. "Now, if you were able to walk about with me, Maude——"

"I wish I was!" she said, in her thin voice. "I often watch you when you think I'm not looking, and I see that you are always thinking, thinking. Mamma says that she's sure you've something on your mind. Have you?"

"A very great deal, Maude," said Gaunt, with a smile.

"And you're not going to Africa because you're ill and going to die?" said the child.

"I hope none of us are going to Africa to die," he said.

"Oh, I am," she remarked, confidently. "Mamma thinks I am going to get better, but I know I am not. Something inside me seems to tell me so."

"We'll hope for the best, Maude," said Gaunt.

"Oh, yes," she assented, cheerfully, "but it isn't much use hoping. And now you're going to walk on the upper deck by yourself, with your arms behind your back and your 'thinking' face on. I wish I could come with you, then p'r'ps you wouldn't think so much; but I can't walk."

"You shall come all the same," said Gaunt; "I'll carry you."

"Will you, really? I'm very heavy, you know!"

With a glance, which asked permission, at her mother,

Gaunt lifted her in his arms, drew the shawl closely round her, and carried her to the upper deck.

She was wonderfully delighted, and prattled to him in her childish, artless way.

"You must be very strong to carry me like this!" she said; "but perhaps you are used to it?"

He thought of the night he had carried Decima, and his lips set tightly.

"No, I've not had much practice in this kind of thing; but you're not very heavy, and I like carrying you."

"And I like you to carry me," she said. "I think you are a very kind gentleman."

"Thank you, Maude," said Gaunt. "That was a very nice thing to say."

Presently he knew by the way in which her head lay on his breast that she was asleep, and he carried her down to the saloon to her mother.

"Thank you, my lord," the lady said, as he placed her little one in her arms. "You must have a kind heart to be so kind to my child."

"I'm fond of children," said Gaunt.

He went up on deck again. A fog was coming on, and he watched it rolling up, from the horizon. He was thinking, not of the child, but of Decima. Where was she now? What would happen to her? She would not marry Mershon. But there would be some one else. Some one, please God, worthy of her. His heart ached with anguish as he thought that he had no right even to protect her. He was startled by a voice near him. It was Mr. Jackson's.

"The fog's coming on thick," he said, in the dull, expressionless tone which was habitual to him.

Gaunt assented.

"How far off are the Canaries?" asked Jackson.

"About two days' sail, I should think," replied Gaunt. Jackson moved away, and Gaunt paced up and down. Presently he almost ran against the captain.

"Thick fog!" he said.

The captain grunted and passed on.

During the night the fog increased. Gaunt, coming on deck the next morning, found the vessel steaming in an impenetrable vapor, as dense as a blanket. Every now

and then she almost came to a standstill. The captain's bell seemed to ring incessantly ; the mate's voice was heard at intervals, gravely and sternly giving orders. Gaunt knew that they were nearing a dangerous coast, but the other passengers, less experienced and informed, displayed no great interest and felt no anxiety. They grumbled at the fog, grumbled at the captain as if he were answerable for it, grumbled at each other ; but there was no anxiety.

Gaunt himself was not apprehensive until the evening of the second day's fog. Then as he was pacing the forward deck he overheard the captain remark to the first mate :

“ Better stop the engines ! ”

Gaunt had crossed the ocean too many times not to know what this meant.

The vessel had lost her reckoning ; the captain did not know where he was.

Gaunt went down to the saloon. Some one was banging away at the piano ; there was the usual laughing and talking. Some of the young people were, under the shelter of the music, flirting boldly ; they all looked happy and free from care.

Then suddenly that peculiar noise of the screw, to which the ocean traveler so soon becomes accustomed, ceased.

Every voice was silent ; the young lady at the piano stopped playing ; every one glanced at his neighbor interrogatively.

Before any question could be asked, the captain came into the saloon. There was an easy smile on his face, and, when a particularly nervous gentleman exclaimed : “ The screw's stopped ! What's the matter, captain ? ” he nodded carelessly and replied :

“ Giving the stokers a rest. Go on with your playing, Miss Brown ; we shall be off again directly ! ”

But the fog increased, and the engines did not start.

Gaunt went on deck, and found the captain in close confab with the mate.

“ Anything wrong, captain ? ” asked Gaunt, quietly.

The captain was about to make a brusque reply, but as he glanced at Gaunt's face he seemed to change his mind.

"Yes, my lord," he said. "We've lost our reckoning. This fog has caught us, fairly caught us."

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Gaunt, "but, of course, there is not."

The captain shook his head, "No." Then he said, as if with an after-thought, "Well, yes; you can go below and keep 'em easy till we get out of this. It may lift directly."

But he looked into the fog doubtfully.

Gaunt, after a glance at the thick vapor through which one could not see a yard, went back to the saloon.

Miss Brown had ceased playing, and silence had settled upon the lately light-hearted crowd. Gaunt went to the piano and struck a chord.

"Have you ever heard this song?" he said.

Everybody turned to him with expectation and surprise.

He was no musician, and he had not touched a piano for years; but in his younger days he had been able to play an accompaniment. He played and sang the Judge's song in "The Trial by Jury."

He scarcely knew what he was singing, but the audience applauded vociferously; all the more vociferously because this usually stern and reserved man had condescended to make an effort for their amusement.

"Encore! Encore! Give us another!" they cried.

Gaunt puzzled his brains, and after dint of thinking remembered another song. It was absolutely necessary that this crowd of timid passengers should be prevented from knowing and thinking of the peril that lay so near them.

He played and sang and little Maude stole up to the piano and leaned against him admiringly and confidently.

"You are a clever man!" she said in her childish treble.

Gaunt rose up from the piano and inducted a more skilful performer.

"Let us have something with a chorus," he said, with a gayety that surprised his hearers, who had hitherto regarded him as the most grim and unsociable of men.

A young lady went to the piano and began the accompaniment to a comic song one of the young men essayed to sing.

Gaunt heard the stern voice of the captain issuing orders, and the tramp of the crew as they obeyed.

The song proceeded, the chorus was being roared, when suddenly there came a peculiar shock and sound which struck the singers dumb.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

No one knew what had happened, but through every man and woman there had run something which had sent cold fear and dread to every heart. They sprang to their feet and looked wildly at each other for a moment in silence, then the first shriek rose from a woman's lips and was instantly followed by others.

There was a rush for the saloon door. That terrible thing, Panic, had taken hold of them, and men and women fought for the narrow doorway, some of the former forgetting their manhood in their terror and pushing the women aside.

Gaunt stood near the door ; he heard the captain as he passed the upper deck door pause and say calmly and sternly :

“ Oblige me by keeping the passengers in the saloon, my lord.”

Gaunt closed the door, and stood with his back to it. The ship was rocking hideously, like a living thing in pain, and some of the women fell to the ground or were thrown there by the mad rush of the men for the door. Gaunt stood firm and square, with his legs apart.

“ We must remain where we are,” he said. “ We must obey the captain's order. There may be no danger ; we should certainly not better things by crowding on the deck and hindering the men.”

Some of them fell back, but one or two of the men still pressed on him, and the nearest caught him by the collar of his coat.

“ Who are you to stand in our way ? ” he demanded, in a voice thick with the frenzy of terror. “ Stand aside ! We're not going to be huddled up down here ! ”

“ Yes, stand aside ! ” said one or two others, advancing threateningly.

Gaunt saw that it was necessary to make an example, and he promptly knocked the first speaker down.

"Please understand," he said, "that not one of us will leave the saloon until we have the captain's permission."

The man picked himself up, and the rest fell back a pace. Gaunt's calmness and firmness were making them ashamed of themselves. Gaunt deliberately shot the bolt in the door, and leaned against it.

"Look to the ladies!" he said to the men. "The trouble may be over in a few minutes. We have a good captain and a good crew, and we can rely upon them to do their utmost for us!"

His quiet words, his perfect self-possession, had their due effect upon the women. They ceased shrieking and screaming, but huddled together, crying and moaning in a subdued fashion.

Gaunt went on talking, doing his best to reassure them. Presently little Maude ran from among the women and came to his side, and stole her hand into his.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "Least I am afraid, but I won't cry, Lord Gaunt!"

He put his hand upon her head.

"That's right, Maude, dear," he said. "There's not much use in crying, is there? And it's very likely that we shall all be laughing again presently."

The vessel still rocked in the same curious way, and the peculiar motion told Gaunt what had happened.

The Pevensey Castle had drifted on to a rock or a sandbank and was swaying to and fro on a pivot as the seas struck her.

Ages seemed to pass while he stood there, holding the crowd by the power of his eye and voice, but presently he heard the captain's step on the stairs, and he opened the door and admitted him. The captain took in the situation at a glance.

"Thank you, my lord!" he said, calmly and quietly, as if he were thanking Gaunt for passing the salt. Then he looked round. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said: "we've struck on a sandbank." He held up his hand as a cry of terror arose. "There's no need to be alarmed. There's no need for a single soul to come to harm. I always think it best to tell the truth, and the whole truth, and

here it is: We're on the coast of Mogador, and not very far from the harbor. The boats are ready, and I'll have you all put ashore as comfortably as possible—that is, if you obey orders. Now, you will please come on deck a dozen at a time; a dozen and no more. Lord Gaunt will be kind enough to point out each lot and see that the order is carried out. May I trouble you so far, my lord?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Very good," said the captain, calmly. "Then I can return to my place on deck."

He put a revolver in Gaunt's hands and went up again.

The crowd watched Gaunt with eager eyes, and almost seemed to cease breathing as he pointed out the first dozen, nine women and three men.

"The men will take charge of the ladies," he said, "and help them into the boat."

If any of the men felt inclined to disobey him his complete self-possession and perhaps the sight of the revolver in his hand, would have restrained them. The first dozen were marshaled out of the cabin to the deck. The others, waiting anxiously, could hear the mate giving orders, and the sailors' "Ay, ay, sir!" as the boat was launched.

The captain called out, "Next lot!" and a second dozen were dispatched. And so it went until only ten remained. Gaunt had intended sending little Maude and her mother in one of the earlier batches, but the child had clung to him and begged to remain.

"Let mamma and me go with you!" she said. "I know we shall be quite safe then."

As the turn of the last lot came Gaunt picked up the child with his left arm, leaving his right free for the revolver, and led the way up on deck. The fog was still thick, but the ship was brilliantly lit by the electric light, and Gaunt looked round upon a scene of admirable order. All the boats had gone save two, and they were ready to be launched at the word of command.

The captain and his officers stood as calmly, and spoke as quietly as if nothing whatever was the matter, and the crew were carrying out their orders with cheerful

alacrity. The last boat but one went off with its living freight ; it consisted of a number of the crew, as well as some of the passengers. Each boat, as it left the rocking ship, sent up a cheer, which was returned by those remaining on deck. "Now, my lord," said the captain, as the last boat was launched.

Gaunt helped the women into their places. He put Maude's mother in, and she held out her arms for the child.

"Good-by, little one!" he said, and he kissed her.

She wound her arms round his neck and looked up at him imploringly.

"Oh, not 'good-by,'" she said. "You're coming ; you're coming ? I won't go without you!"

"Presently ! presently !" said Gaunt. He kissed her again, loosened her hold gently and as gently placed her in her mother's arms.

There was only one place in the boat remaining. Gaunt looked up the gangway. Besides himself, there were only two men left on the deck. One was the captain, and the other, to Gaunt's surprise, was Jackson. The young fellow was very pale, and his lips were apart as if he were breathing hard.

"Now, gentlemen," said the captain. "One of you get in, please. The quicker you are away the better."

Gaunt stood aside and motioned to him.

"You go, captain," he said.

"Thank you, my lord," said the captain quietly. "I stand by the ship."

Gaunt went up the steps quickly and laid his hand upon Jackson's shoulder.

"Off with you !" he said.

"Do you mean it ?"

"Yes," said Gaunt, as quietly as before. "I am going to stay with the captain."

"The d—d ship will be in pieces before the morning," panted Jackson. "It's certain death to stick by her !"

He had been drinking heavily, and his eyes were blood-shot and staring, and the sweat stood in huge drops on his forehead, but he was quite sober, and fully realized the peril and the chance of escape.

"All the more reason you should go," said Gaunt, quickly, but in a low voice.

Jackson still hesitated, and Gaunt, knowing the danger of delay, gripped him by the arm and drew him down the gangway and almost forced him into the boat.

"My God!" murmured Jackson, brokenly, and he let his head fall into his hand as he sank into the seat.

The boat got clear, and as she moved away the last cheer arose, and Gaunt and the captain responded to it, and waved their caps. She was lost to sight in a minute, and the captain and Gaunt, after straining their eyes after her, turned instinctively and looked at each other. The captain held out his hand.

"You are a brave man, my lord!" he said, and for the first time there was a slight tremor in his voice.

Gaunt smiled as he shook the hand.

"One might finish up in a worse way than this, captain," he said. "I suppose there's not much chance for us?"

The captain shook his head.

"Not much, my lord," he said; "the wind's getting up; there's a hole in her bottom—don't you hear the water coming in? She'll heel over before long—" There was no need to finish the sentence. "It's a pity!" he added, after a moment, "a pity! She was a fine vessel, and I'm fond and proud of her."

His voice broke slightly, and he moved away, as if he did not like Gaunt to see his emotion.

Gaunt made his way with some difficulty to the bow, and, leaning against the bulwark, looked into the fog. A strange feeling of peace and rest was stealing over him. As he had said, one might make a worse finish than this. It had been no great sacrifice on his part, the surrender of the place in the boat to Jackson, for he had not the least desire to prolong a life which was now a burden to him. To such men as Gaunt, life is only precious while it holds the possibility of hope and love. He was sorry for the poor ship, sorry for the captain's grief, and still more sorry that so brave a man should perish; but for himself he had no regret, no desire to escape the end.

Indeed, he did not think of himself, but of Decima. As he gazed into the fog his memory and imagination

were limning upon its gray surface the scenes in which he had acted with her. He recalled their first meeting at the Zoo; the day they had met by the stream; the many times they had been together at the Hall; the night of the ball, when he held her in his arms, and lastly, the night of their parting, when he had told her of his love and she had whispered her confession of her love for him.

He could hear her voice, like weird music, infinitely sweet and infinitely sad, coming through the roar of the waves, the grating and grinding of the doomed ship; he could feel her kisses warm upon his lips, feel her arms about his neck, her heart beating against his.

Memory is a strange thing, and at that moment there came back to Gaunt's mind some verses which he had read many years ago, and which he had not thought of since :

“There is no hope,” the curlew moans ;  
 “ She is not thine—she ne'er can be ! ”  
 “ No hope ! ” the murmuring sea intones ;  
 “ No hope ! ” the wind sighs, mockingly.

“ O, love ! though miles may stretch between  
 Us twain, I see thy face, thy form :  
 Thou dwell'st within my heart, my Queen ;  
 And on my lips thy kiss is warm.

“ Oh, love my love ! for some short space  
 Think of me, in this lonely spot,  
 Haunted by your dear voice and face ;  
 And, oh, my love, forget me not ! ”

“Forget me not ! ” What right had he to wish that she should remember him ? His very love for her had fallen like a blight upon her young life. No ! Rather let him wish that she should forget him. And surely she would do so. She was young ; her life still stretched before her. Her love for him would gradually wane and die ; some other man would come and stir her heart with love again. But let him be whom he may, though he were a thousand times worthier of her than he was, he would not love her with more passionate and devoted love than that which had burned like a pure flame in Gaunt's heart.

He pictured her the wife of another man with a keener

anguish than any fear of approaching death could have aroused, but yet with no bitterness, for as he thought of her his lips moved in a fervent prayer for her happiness.

"God bless you, my dearest, my dearest!" he murmured. "May my mad love never cast its shadow over your future happiness!"

The captain came up to him.

"She is filling fast!" he said. "She will go over presently."

Gaunt nodded.

"All right," he said.

The captain took out his pipe.

"Have you any tobacco?" he asked.

Gaunt handed him his pouch; then he filled his own pipe.

They stood side by side, smoking in silence. Suddenly a big wave, which seemed mountains high struck the side; the vessel heeled over, and Gaunt was thrown on his back. When he looked up, half blinded by the spray, he could not see the captain. The brave man had gone.

Another wave smote the doomed vessel, and Gaunt felt himself swept against the deck-house so violently that he was half stunned by the contact. A spar from the rigging lay, across his chest and instinctively he clasped it. He lay thus, for it was impossible to stand for some minutes; then there came another wave, and, still grasping the spar, he was swept overboard. How long he retained consciousness after he had been dashed into the sea cannot be told. To swim was impossible; the ground swell was too violent. Mechanically he still clung to the spar. The tide was setting out to sea, and as he floated he saw that the fog was gradually lifting, and as he was borne on the top of a wave he looked round for the vessel. She had disappeared.

Gaunt prayed for death at that moment, for this terrible solitude in the midst of the roaring waves was infinitely worse than death. Then his senses left him, and with "Decima" upon his lips, he relaxed his hold of the spar.

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When he came to he found, to his amazement, that he was lying in a comfortable berth in a luxurious cabin.

Two men were standing beside him. They exchanged a look, and nodded, as Gaunt opened his eyes. Gaunt looked around and sighed. At that moment he was not particularly glad to come back to life.

"All right, now?" said one of the men who was watching him. He was a young fellow, with a pleasant face and a pleasant smile. He was dressed in yachting costume, and was smoking a cigarette.

"Where am I?" asked Gaunt, with an effort.

"On board the *Sea Wolf*," replied the young fellow. "My yacht. We picked you up early this morning. You've been wrecked, I suppose?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Better not let him talk yet awhile," broke in the second man.

"All right, doctor," assented the young fellow, cheerfully. "You go to sleep if you can," he said to Gaunt. "You'll be all right after a snooze. We'll leave you quiet."

Gaunt closed his eyes again and slept. When he awoke, he found the young fellow standing beside him with a basin of broth.

"Get outside this!" he said. "The doctor—he's a friend of mine, and has come this trip with me—says that you'll pull through all right."

"Thanks; I've no doubt I shall," said Gaunt, not very cheerfully. "May I ask to whom I am indebted?"

"Oh, that's all right," replied the young man. "My name's Dobson. I'm taking a cruise in this yacht of mine. We lost our reckoning in that fog—and it's lucky we did, or we shouldn't have come across you!"

"I was a passenger on board the *Pevensey Castle*," said Gaunt. "She drifted on a sandbank."

He spoke with difficulty, and Mr. Dobson had sense enough to stop him.

"All right," he said. "Tell us all about it when you're more fit. Try and go to sleep again. There's nothing like sleep for your ease, so the doctor says. I've brought you some books and papers, if you can't manage to sleep."

He left the cabin, and Gaunt tried to sleep; but his head ached too much, and presently he took up one of the papers.

He turned it over mechanically, and was putting it down again, when his eye was caught by a heading in large type.

“The Tragedy at Prince’s Mansions! Verdict of Wilful Murder Against Lord Gaunt!”

He read the account in a kind of stupor, and had the paper still in his hand when Mr. Dobson re-entered the cabin.

“How have you been getting on?” he inquired.  
“Been reading the paper? That’s right!”

“Yes,” said Gaunt, quietly, “I have been reading the account of the—murder at Prince’s Mansions.”

“Ah, terrible affair, that,” put in Dobson. “They haven’t got that Lord Gaunt yet, more’s the pity!”

“No?” said Gaunt, raising himself on his elbow. “I am Lord Gaunt, Mr. Dobson. How soon can you take me back to England?”

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

THE news of the wreck of the Pevensey Castle did not reach London until some days after the sad event; but when it did it created a sensation only inferior to that which had been caused by the murder in Prince’s Mansions.

The boats had reached the harbor of Mogador in safety, and the rescued passengers had given full and touching account of the foundering of the ill-fated vessel and the heroic conduct of the captain and Lord Gaunt. That they had both been drowned no one seemed to entertain any doubt, and on the principle of speaking nothing but good of the dead, Lord Gaunt’s crime was forgotten for the moment in admiration for his heroism.

The papers came out with the whole story, and leaders were written, dilating, with editorial unction, upon the dramatic aspect of the affair and the poetical justice which had been dealt out to, as the writers called him, “this unfortunate nobleman.” They, all of them, however, failed to inform their readers what the captain had done to deserve death. But that was a mere matter of detail.

To Decima, lying white and wan in the darkened room, no tidings of the outside world were permitted to reach. She had recovered consciousness, but she lay 'twixt life and death, in that condition of mind and body which resembles stupor. All danger, however, was past; her youth and strength had fought the battle for her, and won it, and as the doctor said, it was only a question of time and careful nursing. For the latter, Lady Pauline could be relied on, and gradually the vacant expression of Decie's eyes changed to one which, although it was sadder, displayed some faint interest in life.

On the day the news of the loss of the Pevensey Castle and Lord Gaunt's death was running like wildfire through the land, Decima turned to Lady Pauline and said:

"I suppose I am not going to die, Aunt Pauline?"

Lady Pauline took the snow-white hand and patted it softly.

"I hope not, dear," she said. "No; you have been very ill, but you are quite out of danger now. I hope that in a few days I shall be able to take you down-stairs. And then we will go to Walfield. You would like to go there, would you not?"

Decima thought for a moment, then she replied:

"I think I would rather go home. Father must miss me. And Bobby will be coming home, and—and it is more comfortable for him when I am there."

"We will see," said Lady Pauline, gently. "We will ask the doctor."

Decima was silent for a moment, then she turned her eyes away and asked:

"Have you seen Mr. Mershon, aunt?"

"Yes," replied Lady Pauline. "I have seen him, and I have told him what you wished him to be told."

Decima breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Aunt Pauline. I—I am afraid he was very angry, was he not?"

"He was," said Lady Pauline, laconically. "But we will not talk of Mr. Mershon, dear, I trust that he has gone out of your life from henceforth."

"Oh, yes, yes!" she cried. "I—I could not marry him!" She shuddered. "He was very kind, and I—I am grateful to him, but I could not marry him now!"

She turned her head away and closed her eyes, and Lady Pauline, who thought she was asleep, looked at the white face sadly. How much longer could the story of the murder and Lord Gaunt's death be kept from Decima, and what would be its effects upon her? She must know sooner or later; the air was full of it, the newspaper boys were yelling it through the streets.

Later in the day Bobby came in. He was terribly upset, and scarcely master of himself.

"You've heard the news, Lady Pauline?" he said, as he entered the drawing-room. He had never been able to address her as "aunt."

"Yes," she said. "It is terrible, and yet——"

"I know," said Bobby, with a kind of groan. "You are thinking that he has escaped a trial for murder, and—and, perhaps the conviction?"

Lady Pauline nodded and sighed.

"He never did it!" said Bobby, fervently.

"No, I don't think he did. But we need not discuss that, Robert. I was thinking of Decima."

Bobby drew a long breath.

"She will hear of it directly she gets about again," he said.

"Yes," said Lady Pauline. "That is inevitable. It will be better that she should hear it from us."

"Ah, yes; but who's to tell her?" he demanded.

"I and you," she said, with her usual courage. "She will bear it better coming from us than from strangers. I think she will be strong enough to-morrow. Will you come in the afternoon, please? I asked her this morning whether she would like to go to Walfield, but she seemed to want to go home."

"To father, yes," said Bobby. "That's like Decima; she thinks of every one before herself. Father will want her, too, for he's in trouble again."

"What trouble?" asked Lady Pauline.

Bobby groaned.

"Oh, Mr. Mershon has cut up rough. It's that confounded—I beg your pardon, Lady Pauline!"

"There's no need for profane expressions, Robert," she said. "But go on."

"It's that unfortunate company, the Electric Storage, you know."

"I don't know, but no matter."

"It seems that the guv'nor is indebted to Mr. Mershon; it's rather a large sum, and Mershon's lawyer, Mr. Gilsby, has written to the guv'nor—well, demanding payment. Father has given Mershon bills, you know."

Lady Pauline sighed.

"I will help your father to the best of my ability, Robert," she said. "I must go up to Decima now. Come to-morrow, and if she is strong enough we will tell her about—about Lord Gaunt."

Bobby left the house and went home; he was staying at a quiet hotel. Prince's Mansions were impossible for him under the circumstances, and he bought the special editions of the evening papers and read every line of the account of the shipwreck and "Lord Gaunt's heroic conduct," and his heart was filled with sorrow for the death of the man whom he had admired and loved so much.

The next day he went to Berkeley Square. Lady Pauline came to him with a grave but determined expression on her face.

"She is much better," she said. "I have considered the question from all points of view, and I have decided that she ought to be told as soon as possible. You may come up now, but you will be careful, Robert?"

Bobby went up to Decima's room. She was propped up by pillows, and looked very white and frail, but she smiled as he entered the room, and wound her arms round his neck.

"I am quite well now, Bobby," she said, "and Aunt Pauline thinks I shall be able to go home in a few days. How is father? And do you think you will pass your exam. this time, dear?"

Bobby kissed her, and so hid his face for a moment. Lady Pauline stood on the other side of the bed, grave and self-possessed.

"Robert has something to tell you, Decie," she said. "Are you sure you are strong enough to bear it? It is sad and painful news; but we think it will come better from us who love you, than in any other way."

Decima looked from one to the other.

"Sad, painful?" she said. Then she sighed. "Yes, tell me, please, Bobby!"

Slowly and hesitatingly, and with many pauses, he told her of the murder, and as she listened her face grew whiter and her horror expressed itself in her eyes.

"Oh, poor lady! poor lady!" she breathed. "I—I saw her portrait. She was his wife! Oh, Bobby!"

"And—and at the inquest they brought a verdict of wilful murder against Lord Gaunt," he said, thickly.

Decima raised herself on her elbow.

"Against—against Lord Gaunt! They could not!" she cried. "Murder! He could not have done it! I—I know that he could not! Where is he? What does he say? Oh, wait a moment; my head is burning! Aunt Pauline, you do not believe it?"

"No, no!" said Lady Pauline. "I do not think him guilty."

"Thank you, oh, thank you, auntie!" said Decima, faintly. "Tell me, tell me it all again! Let me think!"

She put her hand to her brow and closed her eyes.

Bobby went over it all again. It was an easy task, for he had been thinking of nothing else for days past.

"No," said Decima, with an energy which astonished Bobby and Lady Pauline. "It is impossible! I—I know Lord Gaunt! He could not have done it!"

She covered her eyes with her hands for a moment, then she dropped them and looked from Lady Pauline to Bobby.

"He could not! Besides, would he have left his coat? Oh, how can any one think he would have done it?"

Bobby held his breath. Lady Pauline saturated a pocket-handkerchief with cologne and bathed Decima's brow. She waved it aside impatiently.

"I am not going to faint. I am quite strong! Where is Lord Gaunt? What does he say?"

Bobby held his breath.

"Lord Gaunt—Decie, dear, you'll be brave, won't you? Lady Pauline and I think you ought to hear it from us, not by chance, and from strangers—"

"Yes, yes!" she broke in, with a moan. "Tell me—tell me! It would be cruel to keep it from me. I—I want to know!"

"Gaunt went by the Pevensey Castle on the morning after—after the murder."

"Yes," breathed Decima. "He said he was going to Africa! Well? Oh, tell me all! I can bear it; indeed, I can!"

"And—and," faltered Bobby, "the vessel was lost. It foundered off the coast of Africa——"

Decima raised herself and looked at him, with something in her eyes which Bobby will never forget while life lasts.

"And Gaunt—give her something, Lady Pauline; brandy, or—or something!" he broke off.

But Decima waved a refusal of the offered glass.

"Tell me—tell me everything!" she panted.

Bobby struggled with the choking feeling in his throat.

"Gaunt—and—and the captain remained on board after the rest had left, and—and—and—Gaunt——"

Decima fell back on to the pillows, and for a minute or two remained motionless and speechless; then she opened her eyes, and the hopeless misery and despair in them brought the tears to Lady Pauline's eyes.

"And—and he is dead!" came from Decima's white lips.

Bobby bowed his head.

"Yes, I am afraid—they all think he was lost. He—he behaved like a hero. I'll—I'll read the newspaper account to you when you are able."

"Now! now!" she said, in a hollow whisper, and Bobby, as if he could not resist her, drew out the paper and read the account. Decima listened, with fixed eyes and bated breath, to the statement of one of the passengers, who had left the wreck in the last boat.

"You see," said Bobby, struggling with the choking in his throat, "he gave up his place in the boat to that man, Jackson. He kept the passengers in order, and—and stood by the captain till—till—the last! Decie, it—it is just what Gaunt would do, isn't it?"

She opened her eyes upon him, with a wild despair.

"Yes, it is like him!" she said. "It is just what he would do!! Oh—oh, how I wish I had been there! How I wish I had been the little child he kissed!"

"Decie!" murmured Lady Pauline.

Decima turned upon her.

"Yes, I wish I had been there ! I wish I had died with him !"

Then she closed her eyes, and was silent for a moment or two, so long that Lady Pauline thought she had fainted and went to a table for a restorative, but suddenly Deeima opened her eyes and said, with feverish emphasis :

"He is not dead ! I know it ! He is not dead ! If he were I—I should feel it ! No, he is not dead !"

Presently she asked them to leave her alone.

"You will try and bear your burden, dear ?" said Lady Pauline, as she bent over her and kissed her. "We deemed it best to tell you, better that you should hear it from us who love you."

"Yes, yes !" said Deeima, with a sigh, and a weary movement of the thin hand. "You were right to tell me, Aunt Pauline, but—but I want to think. I have not realized it yet ; it is like one of the dreadful dreams that came to me when I was ill : I want to think—and—oh, if I could only cry ! Aunt Pauline, my heart is broken ! But I will try and bear my burden !"

"Pray for strength, dear," whispered the good woman ; but Decima shook her head.

"I can't pray !" she said, miserably and with no irreverence. "I could only pray to die—and that would be wicked."

"Yes, Decima. Life and death are in His hands !" said Lady Pauline, and she and Bobby left the stricken girl alone.

Decima did not close her eyes ; she could see the figure which had been first and foremost in her life, with eyes wide open. And she went over all Lady Pauline and Bobby had told her of the murder, and of Gaunt's life and Gaunt's death.

Not for an instant did the possibility of his guilt enter her mind. She knew him—the innermost heart and soul of the man—too well to permit the faintest touch of doubt as to his innocence. Some other hand had done the deed ; whose, mattered very little to Deeima at that moment, for all her mind and heart were concentrated upon the fate of the man she had loved, and would love with all the strength of her woman's soul, until death.

Not one minute detail of the shipwreck had escaped

her, and she pictured Gaunt keeping order in the cabin, standing on the deck with a child in his arms, giving up his place in the boat to that other man, and then waiting and watching with that calm self-possession, which was Gaunt's birthright, for the end.

And they thought this man who had given his life for others capable of murder !

It may have been wicked of him to make her love him, ah ! he had not made her love him ! It was wicked to ask her to go away with him, the husband of another woman ; but was not some of the blame hers ? And how nobly he had atoned !

She tried to picture him lying dead upon some wild shore, and a craving envy of his fate took possession of her.

“If I had only been there to die with him !” broke from her trembling lips. “Oh, my love ! my love ! How shall I live without you—how shall I ?”

The tears came at last to ease her aching heart, and they were running down her face unheeded when Lady Pauline came back to her.

She slept that night and dreamed. She saw Gaunt standing on the deck watching the last boat leave the ship's side ; she saw him with the child in his arms, but in every vision of him he was alive, and her imagination could not conceive of him as dead.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

THREE days afterward they took Decima home to the Woodbines, Lady Pauline went with her, and she bore the journey very well.

Her father received them in a kind of stupor.

“Dear, dear ! how—pale and thin she is !” he said to Lady Pauline. “I’m—I’m afraid she has been ill ! There seems to be nothing but trouble ! I don’t know whether you know poor Lord Gaunt, Pauline——”

He stopped and tugged at his hair in a bewildered way. “Most terrible affair—most terrible ending ! I—I scarce know the details, though Bobby, who appears to have been mixed up in the business in some extraordinary fashion, which I cannot understand, has been endeavoring

to tell me. It is difficult to believe that a man of his position and culture can have been guilty of a peculiarly brutal murder; but Mr. Mershon is convinced of his guilt—and the verdict of the coroner's inquest——” He stopped and looked about him helplessly. “And Mr. Mershon tells me that—that Decima has broken off her engagement to him. Is that so?”

“Yes,” said Lady Pauline.

Mr. Deane ruffled his hair again, and edged to the door.

“I’m—I’m afraid Mr. Mershon feels it rather acutely. You—you know that there have been business relations between us?”

“Yes,” said Lady Pauline, in her direct way. “You have lost a great deal of money, have you not, Peter?”

“Yes; I’m afraid so. I scarcely know. I thought that the loss had been recouped, or—or provided for in some way; but Robert tells me that—that it is not so, and that I am still liable.”

“I may be able to help you,” said Lady Pauline.

Bobby, who had entered the room in time to hear the last part of the conversation, shook his head gloomily.

“No,” he said. “It is too large a sum. I’m afraid we are up a tree, Lady Pauline. I’ve just seen Mr. Mershon; he wants to see Decima. I told him that she wasn’t fit, and, well, I hinted that it wouldn’t be the least use his seeing her. Decie knows her own mind, and once it’s made up— Ah, yes, it’s all over between Mershon and her. And, well, I’m glad it is, though,” he added, inaudibly, “there will be the devil to pay over these bills! But I don’t seem able to think of anything but poor Gaunt!” he said, aloud. “I’ve just met Bright. He’s terribly cut up; but somehow he can’t bring himself to believe that Gaunt is dead. The next in succession is a cousin of Gaunt’s. He is traveling abroad just now, but Pelford & Lang have written to him. There’s no end of excitement in the village. Gaunt was more popular than one would have thought, and some of the women cried when they talked to me about him. One and all absolutely decline to believe him guilty of—of— They are all very sorry for Decie’s illness. She’s the Lady Bountiful of the village, you know.”

Lady Pauline inclined her head.

"And—and it was she who egged Gaunt on to undertaking all the improvements that have been made. Poor Gaunt!"

Bobby's eyes filled with tears as he turned from the room.

• The next morning Decima came downstairs. She was very pale and thin, and very weak still, and she looked but the ghost of herself as she sat in a low chair by the fire.

"Are you sure you are strong enough to leave your room, Decima?" asked Lady Pauline; and Decima had turned her face to her with a shadowy smile.

"Yes, aunt. I—I want to take up my life again, as—as if nothing had happened. They—father and Bobby—need me." Her voice broke for a moment. "I cannot lie there and think, think any longer! I want something to do, something that will help me to forget. But, ah! no, no, I shall never forget!"

How could it be possible for her to forget the man who had loved her and whom she had loved with all her heart and soul; or cease to remember with anguish that he had gone to his death with the charge of murder hanging over him?

In the afternoon, as she was standing at the window looking sadly at the bare trees swaying in the wind, she saw Mr. Mershon open the gate and come up the path.

Her hand went to her heart, and she looked around as if for help. Lady Pauline had gone to the village with Bobby. There was no one to help her. Well, it was part of her burden, and she must carry it. She rang the bell.

"Tell Mr. Mershon I will see him," she said.

She did not go back to her chair, but stood by the window waiting; and the light was full upon her face as he entered. To him she looked more lovely than ever, with the sadness in the violet gray eyes and the ethereal pallor of the girlish face. His eyes fell before hers as she regarded him steadily, and his hand shook as he took the one she held out to him. For a moment he lost his presence of mind, and no word of the speech he had prepared would come. Then, with an effort, he mastered his emotion, and said, almost abruptly:

"You're better, Decima? I'm very glad; I—I wanted to see you. I've had an anxious time, and—and—you're sure you're better?" he broke off, raising his eyes for an instant to the white face.

"Yes," said Decima. "I'm sorry you should have been anxious, and I am glad you have come."

"Of course I should come the very first moment," he said. At sight of her all his passion revived, and he felt that he would move heaven and earth to keep her. "Of course they—Lady Pauline told me, gave me your message; but I needn't say, Decima, that I didn't attach any importance to it. You—you; very likely you didn't know what you were saying when you sent me word that you wanted to break with me."

"Yes," said Decima. "I was quite conscious, Mr. Mershon."

Her voice was low, but its steadiness surprised even herself.

"You were?" he said huskily. "Then—then I suppose you said what you did because you thought I should be annoyed, riled, at your being mixed up with—with this affair of Lord Gaunt's! Of course, I—it was very natural that I should want an explanation; that I should want to hear all about your visit to his rooms and—and what took place between you."

"Yes," said Decima, quite calmly. "It was your right. It is so no longer. But," she went on as he opened his lips. "I will tell you, because you will then see how—how impossible it was that I should have refrained from sending you my message. I went to see Bobby."

"I know," he said, eagerly.

"And Lord Gaunt came in."

As she spoke his name her eyes closed for an instant, and her hand slid along the edge of the wall as if she were seeking some support.

"And you were together there," he said, nodding gloomily. "What—what passed between you? Don't tell me if you don't like. I'm content to let bygones be bygones, Decima."

"I will tell you," she said. Her lips were quivering, but she steadied them. "Lord Gaunt told me that he loved me."

Mershon started, and his face became black.

“The villain !” he muttered.

Decima’s face grew crimson, and her eyes flashed. She turned away as if she would not say another word ; then, suddenly, she faced him again.

“He told me that he loved me. And I——” Her voice broke for an instant, but she went on painfully. “I knew that I loved him, for a long time. I shall love him while life lasts !”

There were no tears in her eyes, and they met his furious gaze unflinchingly, almost as if she did not see him, or had forgotten his presence.

“And you can tell me this !” he stammered, huskily ; “You can confess that you love a man who was married already—a man who has committed a dastardly murder !”

Decima’s hand went to her heart.

“He did not do it !” she said. “I know it !”

Mershon sneered.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt they have kept the story from you, or as much of it as they could ; you haven’t read the evidence.”

“Yes, every word,” she said. There was a strange light in her eyes, and her voice seemed to have gained a sudden strength. “Every word ; and still I say that he was innocent ! I know it !”

He glanced at her angrily.

“It is a lucky thing for him that he escaped having to face a jury,” he said, with a sneer.

Her lips quivered, and her eyes closed, and a low exclamation of anguish broke from her involuntarily.

“Even—even if he had lived and they had found him guilty ; even if I were convinced that he had done it——”

She stopped and looked beyond him, as if she did not see him.

“Well ?” he demanded.

She lowered her eyes to his face.

“I should love him still !” came slowly from her white lips.

Mershon’s rage and jealousy overmastered him.

“You must be mad !” he said, hoarsely. “After that shameless confession there’s nothing for me but to take myself off !”

He snatched up his hat and looked toward the door ; then his eyes seemed drawn toward her unwillingly. "I—I suppose you have counted the cost of—of this rupture of our engagement ?" he stammered. " You don't forget that your father owes me a large sum of money ? Perhaps your brother—your precious brother," he sneered, " has made the consequences pretty plain to you ?"

She looked at him as if she were trying to attend, to understand.

" I see you do," he said. " Well, of course, I stand to my word, and I expected you to stand by yours. I undertook in the event of your marrying me to assume your father's liabilities and to provide for your brother ; as the marriage is off—as you break the engagement, and—and—insult me by the statement you have just made, you can't expect me to carry out my part of the contract. You understand enough of business to comprehend that ?"

" Yes, I understand," she said in a low voice. " I am sorry—yes, I am sorry—that I cannot marry you. But I cannot ! It would have been hard before, but now——"

She turned away, as if she felt that it would be impossible for him to understand what that now meant ; and Mershon, with an almost audible oath, left the room.

His dogcart was waiting for him, and he leaped into it and drove home to the Firs at a gallop. As he tore up the steps and entered the hall, his sister came out from the drawing-room. She held a telegram in her hand, but in his fury he did not see it.

" Where are you going ?" he demanded, for she had on her outdoor things.

" I—I was going to the Woodbines to—to inquire for Decima—to see if she were well enough to see me ?" she faltered.

" Then you won't do anything of the sort !" he snarled. " You won't go there again ! Do you hear ?"

" What—what has happened, Theodore ?" she asked, timidly.

" The engagement is broken off," he said, huskily, as he flung his hat aside, and drew his hand across his sweat-covered brow. " She's—she's behaved shamefully ! She's disgraced herself ! She's not fit for a decent man to marry. She——"

The words seemed to choke him and he broke off with an oath.

“But I'll punish her! I'll punish her! I've got that old fool of a father of hers under my thumb—and that young ruffian, the brother! I'll punish her through them. Yes, by God! I'll have them turned out into the street within a week! I've told Gilsby to act!”

“Oh, Theodore!” she faltered. “Poor child—poor child! You will not!—”

“Won't I?” he broke in, with a malignant sneer. “Poor child! A pretty child! To admit, to boast, that if—if that beast were proved guilty she'd love him still! What! do you think I'm a dog, a cur, to be kicked aside and not resent it? I'll have my revenge! I'll turn them into the street. What the devil are you crying and trembling at? Here—what's that?”

He snatched the telegram from her hand and tore open the envelope.

She was going back to the drawing-room, when she heard him utter a cry, a cry of rage and baffled fury, and she turned back.

Mershon was leaning against the wall glaring at the telegram. He raised his head presently, and his lips moved, but no sound came. The telegram fell from his hand, and, in fear and trembling she went forward and picked it up. He did not prevent her, and she read the wire. It was from Mr. Gilsby, the lawyer, and it ran thus:

“All D.'s bills met. Some one has undertaken to discharge all his liabilities. Will write.”

Mershon seemed to awaken from his stupor, and snatching the telegram from her, he went upstairs. She watched him for a moment, then her lips moved and she breathed softly:

“Thank God!”

Mershon as he went unsteadily up the stairs, holding by the balustrade, and stumbling now and again like a man smitten with palsy, had no need to ask who the “some one” was. He knew that Gaunt had stretched out a hand from the grave as it were, to shield and protect the girl he loved.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the evening of the same day Mr. Pelford was arranging his papers on his desk, preparatory to going home.

He had had a particularly hard day, and looked tired and worried, and as the door opened and his partner Mr. Lang, put his head round it, Mr. Pelford glanced up with a frown.

“Nearly ready?” asked Mr. Lang.

They both had handsome houses at Dulwich, and when practicable and convenient, journeyed homeward together.

“Yes, I think so,” replied the senior partner with a sigh. “I'll just indorse these letters. No news, I suppose?”

“News” had come to mean to Messrs. Pelford & Lang tidings of their client, Lord Gaunt.

Mr. Lang shook his head.

“No; none. I'm afraid that it is hopeless to expect any now. He must have been lost.”

Mr. Pelford nodded and sighed.

“Poor fellow! Though, after all, I'm afraid one ought to feel more relief than regret at his death. He might have ended so—so much worse.”

Mr. Lang assented with a gesture.

“I've written to young Lord Naseby, the next heir—Lord Gaunt, I suppose he is now; but I'm doubtful whether my letter will reach him. What a singular thing it is—this love of travel and wandering running through the family! Oh, and, Lang, that fellow, Thorpe, has been here again to-day!”

“Oh? What did you do?”

“Well, I'm afraid it was weak,” replied the senior partner, apologetically, “but I advanced him some money to take him out of the country.”

“You did!”

“Well, yes! You see, if Lord Gaunt—I mean our Gaunt—should turn up; but that's impossible. Anyway, the next Gaunt will be glad to get rid of the fellow. He has spent the time since the inquest going the round of any of the clubs that would admit him and telling the story of his and his sister's wrongs.”

“In exchange for free drinks, I suppose?” said Mr. Lang.

"Er—yes. So I gave him enough to take him to Monte Carlo."

"Where it is to be hoped he will remain!" remarked Mr. Lang.

Mr. Pelford indorsed the last letter, rose with a sigh and took his overcoat from the peg behind the door.

"Did you see Mr. Gilsby?" he inquired, with an accent on the name which Mr. Gilsby would not have enjoyed hearing.

"Yes!" Mr. Lang smiled. "I never saw before in my whole life a man sorry at receiving money! And Mr. Gilsby was very sorry, there is no doubt of that. It is evident that that man Mershon was bent on ruining the Deanes."

Mr. Pelford shrugged his shoulders with a little weary gesture. He had had a hard day, and any reference to Lord Gaunt's affairs reminded him of the trouble and anxiety the murder in the Prince's Mansions had caused him.

"The whole affair is a mystery," he said; "but it is very evident that Mr. Mershon hated poor Lord Gaunt."

"And of course the young lady, Miss Deane, was the reason," said Mr. Lang. "There are your gloves on that deed ease."

"Oh, thanks, thanks! I feel so worried! Are you ready? If so I'll turn out the gas."

He had his hand on the key when they both heard a step on the stairs. All the clerks had gone, and the two principals were alone in the office.

"Now, who can that be?" said Mr. Pelford, testily. "Whoever it is I shall not stay. We shall lose our train."

The footsteps stopped outside the door and there came a knock.

"Open the door, Lang, and tell them that we cannot stay," said Mr. Pelford.

Mr. Lang opened the door. Then he uttered an exclamation and fell back, and Gaunt walked in.

Mr. Pelford dropped his hat on the desk and it rolled, unheeded to the floor.

"Lord Gaunt!" he gasped, and he stared and gaped at the tall figure and haggard face.

"How do you do, Mr. Pelford?" said Gaunt, quietly

—very quietly—with that self-possession and sang-froid which had often astonished his legal advisers and not seldom puzzled and annoyed them. “How do you do, Mr. Lang? I am afraid I am late——”

“Good God! my lord, do you know—! When did you come? Where?” demanded Mr. Pelford.

Gaunt stood on the other side of the table.

“One moment,” he said; “I want to ask you a question. Is Miss Deane in London?——”

“Miss Deane!” echoed Mr. Pelford, amazed at the question at such a moment.

“Yes; where is she?”

“Er—er—Miss Deane is—is at home, at Leafmore, I believe. But, oh, Lord Gaunt, where did you come from?”

“Is she well?” broke in Gaunt, almost sternly.

The lawyers stared at him.

“Er—er—yes. That is—she is better. She has been ill.” Gaunt’s face worked. “But she is better. She is at home. But—but, good God! my lord, where have you come from? What—why——”

“From Southampton,” said Gaunt, quietly, vouchsafing the information now that he had learned something of Decima.

“From Southampton!” gasped Mr. Pelford. “Then—then you were saved? You are alive?”

“Yes,” said Gaunt, as quietly as before. “I was picked up by a yacht, the Sea Wolf, and the owner kindly turned back and landed me in England.”

The two partners exchanged glances, the sharp, legal glance.

“Then—then, perhaps you do not know—that is—you have not learned that—that——”

Gaunt regarded him gravely.

“Yes,” he said, “I saw the account in a newspaper on board the yacht. You said that Miss Deane was better. Do you mean that she is out of danger? I gathered that she had been very ill?”

Mr. Pelford ignored the question.

“Then—then you know that—that—Won’t you sit down, my lord? Lang, there is a small flask of brandy in the corner of the safe; perhaps his lordship——”

Gaunt declined the small flask of brandy which Mr. Lang proffered.

"I know," he said.

"That—that a murder was committed and that—" Mr. Pelford could not go on.

"That I am deemed guilty, yes, yes," said Gaunt, as quietly as before. "I did not do it. Who did?"

Mr. Pelford sank into his chair. He had, he thought, grown accustomed to the Gaunt sang-froid, but he felt that he was mistaken; this surpassed all his previous experience.

"You—you did not?" he stammered.

"No!" said Gaunt, not sternly, but quite coolly and gravely. "I may be a fool, but I am not fool enough to commit a murder and then cover my victim with my own coat."

Mr. Pelford gasped for breath.

"But—but you are aware my lord, that there is a verdict of wilful murder against you; that—that there is a warrant for your arrest?" he stammered.

"Yes," said Gaunt, quietly. "And I have come back to meet the charge. There was a policeman outside as I came up. Shall I call him?"

He went to the window, but Mr. Lang seized him by the arm and drew him back.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. LANG dragged Gaunt from the window and almost forced him into a chair.

"For God's sake, don't—don't do anything rash, Lord Gaunt!" he said. "Give us time to—to think, to consider!"

Both partners were very much agitated and not without reason. It was as if a ghost had walked into the room.

Gaunt shrugged his shoulders.

"It must be sooner or later; why not to-night?" he said.

His coolness and indifference almost exasperated Mr. Pelford.

"You do not appear to realize the gravity of your posi-

tion, Lord Gaunt!" he said agitatedly. "Perhaps it will help you to do so when I say—gravely and emphatically—that—that we are sorry to see you here."

"You cannot be more sorry than I am," said Gaunt, quietly. "It would be better for me if I were lying at the bottom of the sea. But I am alive, and on land and the music had to be faced."

He spoke almost cheerfully. Now that he had heard that Decima was safe at the Woodbines and better, nothing else seemed to matter much; certainly nothing that concerned himself.

"I can't understand how you have been able—been permitted—to reach us!" said Mr. Pelford.

Gaunt shook his head.

"I suppose the police have given me up for dead," he said. "I expected to find some one waiting to arrest me at Southampton; but I was not stopped or interfered with. I had some difficulty in getting here, for the owner of the yacht—a good fellow—wanted to carry me off to some place where there was no extradition treaty. He thinks me innocent, notwithstanding the evidence."

"I wish he had!" exclaimed Mr. Pelford. "Seriously, Lord Gaunt, the evidence is—is—"

"Very strong!" said Mr. Lang under his breath.

Gaunt looked from one to the other.

"Do you mind my smoking? Thanks." He lit a cigarette. "I have read it all; there was a newspaper, several, on board the Sea Wolf, and I got all I could at Southampton. Yes, it is black enough." He paused. "I suppose nine persons out of ten, ninety-nine out of a hundred, would consider me guilty?"

Mr. Pelford was a truthful man, and did not reply.

"May I ask if you do?"

Gaunt put the question quietly and without a trace of resentment.

Mr. Pelford looked at him in silence for what seemed a long time; then he said:

"No!"

"Thanks," said Gaunt. "No, I am not guilty; and yet all the evidence is true and unrestrained, I suppose many a man has been hanged on less?"

Mr. Lang shuddered.

"For God's sake, don't—don't take it so coolly, Lord Gaunt!" he said.

Gaunt was silent for a moment, then he asked, as if his thoughts had taken quite another direction :

"Did you attend to that matter of Mr. Deane's? Discharge his debts?"

"Yes, yes!" said Mr. Pelford, almost impatiently. "We carried out your instructions, my lord. Mr. Deane's liabilities are discharged, provided for, at any rate."

"Thank you," said Gaunt. "And now, gentlemen, I am at your disposal. I am rather tired; I have not slept much of late."

The partners conferred in whispers, then Mr. Pelford said :

"Is there any place in which you could spend the night undisturbed, Lord Gaunt? Will you come home with one of us?"

Gaunt thought for a moment.

"Thank you very much; but I don't think that would be very wise of you. Wouldn't it be rather unprofessional—harboring a criminal? I don't know anything of the law regarding such matters, but I've an idea that you would run the risk of unpleasantness. No; thanks! I'll go to Morlet's. They know me, and—" he smiled—"will give me shelter for to-night. To-morrow I will give myself up after breakfast, if I'm permitted to get through that meal in liberty."

The partners assented to this.

"We have got Sir James, Lord Gaunt," said Mr. Pelford, "and I need scarcely say that he will do all he can. He is the very best man. By the way, Mr. Boskett appeared against us at the inquest. He was retained by Mr. Mershon."

Gaunt had heard of the famous Old Bailey barrister. He smiled grimly.

"I understand," he said.

"But do you?" demanded Mr. Pelford, desperately. "Do you realize the—the awful position in which you stand, Lord Gaunt?"

Gaunt got up from the chair and lit a fresh cigarette.

"I think so," he said. "At any rate, I know that you

will do your best for me, Mr. Pelford ; and I am grateful. I will go now. You said that Miss Deane was—was better ? ”

“ Yes, yes,” replied Mr. Pelford, impatiently. “ We will go with you to the hotel.”

“ No, do not,” said Gaunt. “ You are better known than I am, and might attract attention, and, candidly, I should like to spend to-night in a comfortable bed, even if I do not sleep. Good-night. Come to me in the morning. If I am arrested before you come I will send for you.”

He shook hands with them and went with his light, firm step down the stairs.

The two lawyers gasped at each other in blank dismay.

“ I always said that there was madness in the family ! ” exclaimed Mr. Pelford. “ He takes it as coolly as if—if it were a case of ‘ a month or forty shillings ! ’ ”

“ I don’t believe he did it ! ” remarked Mr. Lang.

“ Then who did ? ” retorted Mr. Pelford ; and Mr. Lang could not answer.

Gaunt went down into the street. His coolness and sang-froid had been quite free from affectation. Now that Decima was better, it did not in the very least degree matter what became of him. The lamps had been lit, and the streets of the largest and wealthiest city in the world were wrapped in their usual gloom. That same gloom which is one of the things which fill the intelligent foreigner, visiting our land for the first time, with amazement and dismay.

It was rather a long walk from Pelford & Lang’s office to Morlet’s, but Gaunt welcomed it. It gave him time to think. Mr. Dobson, notwithstanding the evidence against Gaunt, had been so assured of his innocence that he had tried, with flattering eagerness, to dissuade Gaunt from returning to England and giving himself up ; but Gaunt had refused to be dissuaded. The Gaunts, whatever their sins—and, as a family, they were peculiarly rich in this respect—had never lacked courage, and Gaunt had resolved to “ face the music.”

He insisted upon Mr. Dobson making for Southampton, and Mr. Dobson had at last, driven to it by entreaties and arguments, consented.

As to the result of his surrender Gaunt was perfectly

indifferent. He was weary of the game which we label "life," and though he would have preferred to finish it at some other place than on the scaffold, he did not care very much so that it were finished. He had lost Decima forever, and for him life with all its possibilities was over.

Leaving Pelford & Lang's offices, he walked slowly and thoughtfully toward Morlet's hotel.

As he turned the corner by Berry Street he almost ran against a man who was slouching along the pavement. The man was walking with a peculiar, dragging gait, and had his coat collar turned up, and his hands thrust in his pockets. For an instant it struck Gaunt that there was something familiar to him in the manner of the man, and as he, Gaunt, muttered "Pardon!" he looked after him. The man made no response and Gaunt walked on.

Presently he heard footsteps behind him.

"A detective," he said to himself. "I shall not sleep in a comfortable bed to-night, after all."

He walked on. The footsteps behind him grew close, and Gaunt, almost at the entrance to Morlet's pulled up short, and glanced round. The man who had been following him pulled up as shortly and the two looked at each other in the light of the street lamp.

Gaunt recognized the "shadow," and was the first to speak.

"Jackson!" he said.

The man started, hung his head, then raised it and looked at Gaunt with a dull, vacant intensity.

"Why, it is you, Jackson!" said Gaunt. "How did you come here? I'm glad to see you!"

Mr. Jackson's lips moved as if he found it difficult to articulate.

"I—I thought it was you, and so—so I followed," he said. "I landed at Portsmouth this morning. I only reached London this afternoon."

Now there is no one for whom you feel a keener interest than the man whose life you have saved at the risk of your own; and Gaunt, notwithstanding his natural reserve, felt pity toward this waif and stray. So, he regarded Jackson with a frank smile of welcome.

"I read of your safe landing at Mogador," he said.

Jackson nodded, and looked from side to side in an abstracted fashion.

"Yes; they took us to the Canaries, and the mail steamer brought us back to England."

"But you wanted to go to Africa?" remarked Gaunt.

Jackson gazed up at the leaden London sky, and then at the nearest lamp.

"Yes, I did. But it didn't matter."

"Not matter!" said Gaunt. He looked at the man attentively. Jackson seemed thinner than he had been on board the *Pevensey Castle*. His face was white, his eyelids red and swollen, and his bearing and manner those of a man who has been drinking heavily, or is very ill.

"No," said Jackson, dully; "it didn't matter."

"Where are you going?" asked Gaunt.

It seemed to him that, having saved the man's life he was, in a sense, responsible for his future welfare.

"I don't know," said Jackson, indifferently.

"You'd better come with me," said Gaunt. "I am going to Morlet's Hotel. They'll be able to find a room for you, I dare say. You look—you look tired."

"I am wet, and I am tired," said Jackson.

They went up the highly-respectable steps of Morlet's, and the highly respectable Wilkins met them at the door; it is scarcely necessary to say that the highly-respectable Wilkins sustained a severe shock at the sight of Lord Gaunt.

"My—my lord!" he gasped.

Gaunt nodded and smiled at him.

"All right, Wilkins," he said, easily. "I want a room—a couple of rooms—one for my friend here, for to-night only. You are looking well, Wilkins. Can I have my old room?"

If Lord Gaunt had been ten times the criminal the world believed him to be, Wilkins could not have resisted that smile or the tone which accompanied it. He led the way in a solēmn and impressive silence.

"You'll give us some dinner—anything, Wilkins," said Lord Gaunt, as easily as before: and Wilkins, all in a flutter, could only bow and respond with:

"Certainly, my lord!"

Gaunt waited until the man Jackson had been conducted to his room, then went to his own and washed.

When he came down, Jackson was standing before the fire, and Gaunt saw, more plainly than he had seen in the street, the wasted and woebegone countenance of the man he had saved from a watery grave.

The dinner was served—an admirable dinner, considering the shortness of the notice; but neither of the two men could do it justice. Gaunt was thinking of Decima and the charge that hung over his head, and Jackson also appeared to be over-weighted by trouble.

"A good dinner wasted," said Gaunt, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "There is a reason for my want of appetite, but I don't know of any for yours, Mr. Jackson. Will you have some of this soufflé?"

"No, thanks!" said Jackson. "I—I should like some brandy."

Gaunt signed to Wilkins, and he brought the desired spirit. Jackson drank half a tumbler off.

"What's the reason you can't enjoy your dinner?" he asked, regarding Gaunt with lack-lustre eyes, round which were rims as red as if they had been painted.

Gaunt smiled grimly.

"Well, I suppose because it is the last I shall eat in liberty—freedom—for some time," he replied.

"What do you mean?" demanded Jackson.

Gaunt lit a cigarette.

"You know my name?" he asked.

Jackson nodded.

"And have read the papers—the newspapers?"

Jackson shook his head.

"No!"

"Ah!" said Gaunt, reluctantly. "If you had, it would have saved me an explanation. I am Edward Barnard Gaunt, and I am charged with the murder of—of my wife at Prince's Mansions."

## CHAPTER XXX.

JACKSON set down the glass untasted which he had been raising to his lips. His manner was so indicative of surprise, amazement, that Gaunt stared at him.

"Do you mean to say that you have not seen a paper—a London paper?" he asked.

Jackson moistened his lips with his tongue.

"No," he said; "I—I haven't seen a paper. I—I know nothing about it. There was no paper on board the ship that took us off from Mogador."

Gaunt sighed.

"It's soon told," he said. "A woman was murdered at one of the flats at Prince's Mansions—What is the matter?" he broke off, as Jackson half rose from his seat.

"Nothing—nothing!" said Jackson, with the hollow cough which Gaunt had noticed several times during the meal.

"She was murdered—stabbed with a Persian dagger. The dagger was mine. The coat thrown over her—a fur-coat, easy to identify—was my coat; and"—he paused—"the woman was my wife!"

"Yours!" ejaculated Jackson.

He gripped the table with both hands and stared at Gaunt with his hollow, bloodshot eyes, with a gaze half of amazement, half of terror.

"Yes, mine!" said Gaunt, leaning back in his chair and gazing moodily at the tablecloth. "She was my wife. I married her, thinking her all that was good and pure, and innocent. I loved her. But that's a different part of the story. The salient facts are that she was found—murdered—in my rooms. That I had been there!"

"You! You had been there!" ejaculated Jackson.

"Yes," said Gaunt: He had almost forgotten his auditor and was communing with himself. "I had been there. She came in while I was there, and there was a scene. I dare say I threatened her—God knows she tried me hardly enough!—and I was very likely overheard by the servants. In short, Mr. Jackson, the evi-

dence is very black against me. I tell you all this because you may object to continue an acquaintance with a man who lies under so heavy a charge, and whom you will probably think guilty."

Jackson leaned back in his chair and with his head sunk between his shoulders, coughed appallingly and stared at Gaunt.

"If you'd like to say 'Good-by' and go to another hotel," said Gaunt, "pray do so. I shall not be offended, or deem your desire to cut my acquaintance an unreasonable one."

"She was your wife?" said Jackson, in a hollow voice, and apparently ignoring Gaunt's suggestion. "Your wife!"

"Yes," said Gaunt, with a sigh. "And, when I think of her lying dead, I can only remember that I once loved her, and I can forgive her all the misery she caused me."

Again he spoke more to himself than to Jackson, who, sunk deeply in his chair, looked a ghastly object, and scarcely capable of understanding the case, but presently, without taking his bloodshot eyes from Gaunt's face, he said :

"If the evidence against you is so strong, why, in the devil's name, did you come back? You might have got off in that yacht, and—there would have been no more bother."

Gaunt raised his eyebrows slightly.

"If I had been guilty, I suppose that is what I should have done," he said; "but I am innocent. Of course I do not insist upon your believing me——"

Jackson made a movement with his hand.

"And, being innocent, of course, I have come back to face the thing. What else could I do?" he added simply.

Jackson's eyes wandered round the room, then returned, with their fixed stare, to Gaunt's face.

"You take it coolly!" he said, hoarsely, and with an oath. "Suppose—suppose they find you guilty?"

"Then I shall not be the first man who has suffered innocently," said Gaunt, gravely.

Jackson got up from his chair with difficulty, and went and leaned against the mantel. The short journey

brought on his cough again, and he bent double, and put his handkerchief to his lips. As he took it away Gaunt saw that there was blood upon it.

"I'm afraid you're very ill, Mr. Jackson," he said. "Don't you think you had better go to bed, and let me send for the doctor?"

Jackson waved the suggestion away impatiently.

"I'm all right," he said, sullenly. "Who—who did this murder?" he asked, hoarsely.

Gaunt shook his head.

"I have not the least idea. I know nothing of my wife's life since I left her, or her recent movements, and I suppose the police are so assured of my guilt that they didn't deem it necessary to look in any other direction."

A curious gleam shot for a moment into Jackson's eyes as he bent over the fire.

"The police are fools!" he said. "I suppose any one could have got into the flat, the room? What's the name of the Mansions?" he asked, with a cunning glance at Gaunt.

"Prince's Mansions," said Gaunt. "I do not think so, The servants would have seen any one enter."

Jackson smiled; his back was to Gaunt.

"If I'd been the detective in charge of the case, I should have raked up her past life; I should have found out what friends she had: who she'd quarreled with lately. They're fools!"

He turned round and looked at Gaunt; his face was flushed with a kind of childish satisfaction, and he began to laugh in a meaningless fashion, but the laugh was cut short by the awful hacking cough and again the handkerchief was stained with blood.

"Look here, Jackson," said Gaunt, "I must insist upon your going to bed, and having the doctor. You see, I somehow feel responsible for you, having brought you here."

"Yes, I know," said Jackson. "You saved my life; you gave up your place in the boat——"

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Gaunt quickly.

"No, but I was!" broke in Jackson, in a hollow voice. "I am bad, I know; but you don't suppose you're the only man who isn't afraid of death, do you? Perhaps

I've got as much pluck as you have," he added, with a kind of defiance.

"My good fellow, I don't doubt your courage," said Gaunt. "And, as to being afraid of death, life isn't such a desirable thing for most of us that we should cling to it very desperately. But you're a young man, Jackson, and have got all the world before you, and you ought to take better care of yourself."

Jackson stared at him gloomily.

"You're young yourself," he said, "and rich. I suppose—" Gaunt shrugged his shoulders—"and a nobleman. What's the matter with life that you should get so d—d anxious to lose it?"

Gaunt smiled grimly.

"Life is just what we make of it, Jackson," he said. "I've made a mess of mine and, candidly, I am exceedingly sorry that the Sea Wolf happened to lose her way in the fog that night. But I won't bore you any longer with the story of my griefs and sorrows," he added, with a smile. He rose as he spoke, poured out a glass of the Morlet port—it was excellent wine—and carried it to Jackson. "Drink that," he said. "I don't think it will hurt you; then go to bed. I'll send for my doctor tomorrow; he's a clever fellow, and will put you right, I hope."

Jackson took the glass and drank the wine, looking steadily at Gaunt as he did so.

"Don't trouble to send for your doctor," he said. "He couldn't do any good. I'm past tinkering: I know that. I've led the devil's own life for some time past, and that night in the fog off Mogador put the finishing touch."

He set the empty glass down on the mantel-shelf and moved to the door. He was a young man, as Gaunt had said, but he looked a very old one, and very bad and feeble at that, as he shuffled along, with his red head bowed on his breast and his hands hanging limply at his side.

At the door he paused, and looked round the room and then at Gaunt.

"Good-night," he said. "I haven't forgotten what you've done for me. You're a brave man, Lord Gaunt, and I—d—n it, I admire you."

"Thanks," said Gaunt, with a smile. "Good-night, or rather good-by. I expect I shall be gone before you come down to-morrow. Don't hurry up, but take a long rest. Oh, by the way! Do you happen to want any money? If so——"

He took out his purse. He still felt as if, having saved the man's life, he was in a sense responsible for his welfare.

Jackson's face grew red, then livid, and he looked at Gaunt with a curious expression in his bloodshot eyes.

"I've got plenty of money," he said, brusquely. "Good-night!" and he left the room.

Gaunt was not sorry to lose him for though he had saved the man's life and was anxious to befriend him, he did not like him, but perhaps for that very reason he felt that he must look after him, and do the best for him. It was like Gaunt to think of another man, even in the midst of his own terrible trouble.

He drew his chair to the fire, and lit a pipe, and—is it necessary to say?—began to think of Decima.

He spent a couple of hours in the delightful occupation of thinking how exquisite a thing life would have been if he had met his girl-love years ago; if he had not married; if— Life is made up of "ifs." He sighed, rose and stretched himself and went out into the hall.

Wilkins was standing there as if waiting for him.

"Well, Wilkins," he said cheerfully. "I suppose you know whom you have been harboring?"

Wilkins colored, then became pale.

"I'll never believe you did it, my lord!" he said, with agitation.

"Thank you," said Gaunt. "As a matter of fact, I didn't. Have me called early to-morrow, Wilkins, will you? I should like to have my breakfast before the police come."

"Certainly, my lord," said Wilkins, with a gasp. "I 'ope your lordship don't blame me? I had to give evidence."

Gaunt smiled rather wearily.

"I don't blame any one but myself," he said. "Good-night."

He was very tired, and he slept soundly. He dreamed of Decima that night; as he had dreamed—how often!

He thought he saw her standing at a distance from him and smiling at him. But she was a long way off, and though he stretched out his hands toward her, he could not reach her.

He came down to breakfast the next morning as calm and self-possessed as usual. Wilkins was waiting as if nothing were the matter.

"Where is Mr. Jackson?" asked Gaunt.

Wilkins coughed.

"He left the hotel early this morning, my lord," he said. Gaunt shook his head.

"I'm afraid he was not fit to go out."

"No, my lord," said Wilkins. "I heard the gentleman coughing all night; it was something dreadful."

"Take care of him, if he comes back," said Gaunt. "He ought to be in bed, and under a doctor's care."

Gaunt ate his breakfast, and he was lighting a cigarette when Wilkins announced two gentlemen. They were Mr. Pelford and Mr. Burns, the detective in charge of the case.

Mr. Pelford was very pale and evidently struggling with his agitation.

"This is Mr. Burns, Lord Gaunt," he said, "the detective."

Gaunt nodded, and Mr. Burns looked at him keenly.

"Sorry to disturb you, my lord," he said.

"Not at all," said Gaunt. "I'm afraid I've given you a great deal of trouble, Mr. Burns: quite unwittingly. Will you take a cup of coffee? No! A cigarette?"

He handed his cigarette case.

Mr. Burns was rather staggered. He had had a large experience with criminals, small and great, but he had never met with one quite so cool as this.

"I'm afraid I have an unpleasant duty to perform, my lord," he said.

"Most duties are unpleasant, Mr. Burns," said Gaunt. "You have come to arrest me I suppose."

"I'm afraid so, my lord," said the detective. "I need not warn your lordship that I shall be obliged to use anything you may say against you."

"Quite so!" said Gaunt. "Wilkins, may I trouble you to get my hat and coat?"

"I wish to remark," said Mr. Pelford, with an agita-

tion in strong contrast to Gaunt's coolness, "that Lord Gaunt has come back to England of his own free will, and with some difficulty, to meet this charge."

"I quite understand that," said Mr. Burns. "I've got a brougham outside. We shall drive straight to Holloway."

It was a long drive to Holloway, but they reached it at last, and the governor of the prison received his famous charge courteously. As Gaunt was only a "suspect," and had not yet even been examined, though committed on the coroner's warrant, the governor was able to allot him fairly comfortable quarters, and Gaunt found himself in a fairly large and decently furnished room.

"This is quite luxurious," he said.

The governor smiled apologetically, and Mr Pelford looked around with a sigh. Presently he was alone with Gaunt.

"Is there anything that you can tell me—anything that will help us, Lord Gaunt?" he said.

Gaunt seated himself on the bed and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Pelford," he said. "If I were to go over it all, I should only repeat the evidence against me. I cannot deny that I was at Prince's Mansions the night of the—the murder; that the poor woman, my wife, came in while I was there; that I had a scene with her—a scene which is engraved on my memory, and I fear will never leave it—and that I left her storming against me. It was my coat that was found covering her; it was my dagger with which she was stabbed. Against these facts my bare assertion that I did not kill her will weigh but very little, I am afraid."

Mr. Pelford went to the window, heavily barred, and stared out into the prison courtyard.

The case looked very black.

He remained with Gaunt for half an hour, talking over the thing, until Gaunt was weary and sick at heart; then he went and Gaunt was left alone.

He was almost glad of the quietude. He was free to think of Decima.

Certain privileges, which to a free man would seem of very little worth, but which to a prisoner are valued ex-

ceedingly, were permitted him. His meals were sent in by the nearest hotel ; there was a goodly supply of newspapers and magazines. But Gaunt could not read and he could not do justice to the dishes which had been so considerately supplied.

The short winter day was drawing to a close, when there came a knock at the door and the governor entered.

“There are some visitors for you, Lord Gaunt,” he said.

Gaunt rose from the bed on which he was lying.

“Oh, very well,” he said,

He thought it might be Mr. Pelford or Mr. Lang ; but the governor ushered in Mr. Bright and Bobby.

For the first time Gaunt's self-possession forsook him, and he could not speak as Bobby rushed forward and took his hand ; but he recovered his usual sang-froid in a moment or two.

“This is good of you, Bobby !” he said.

“We got a wire this morning,” gasped Bobby ; “and Bright and I came up !”

Gaunt shook hands with Bright.

“I'm fated to be a trouble to you, Bright,” he said.

Bright could not find his voice for a moment, then he panted :

“Thank God, you are alive ! Oh, what is to be done, my lord ?”

Gaunt shrugged his shoulders.

“Not very much, I'm afraid, Bright,” he said. Then he turned to Bobby quickly :

“Is your sister, Miss Deane, quite well ?”

“Yes—yes !” replied Bobby. “She's all right. She's here—with Lady Pauline !”

Gaunt winced, and the color left his face.

“Here ! Not here—in the prison ?”

“Yes,” said Bobby. “She would come ; nothing could stop her.”

“I am sorry !” said Gaunt, gravely. “Will you not take her back, Bobby ?”

Bobby shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It wouldn't be any use asking her. You don't know Decima !”

“Do I not ?” thought Gaunt.

“The moment we got the telegram,” said Bobby, “she

insisted upon coming up. She said she'd been there at the Mansions, that night, and she might help you."

"I know," said Gaunt, quietly. "That your sister was there is my greatest trouble. That she should be mixed up with this affair, that her name should be mentioned in connection with it, causes me greater grief than anything else. Will you tell her that I am deeply grateful to her for coming, but that I—I—"

"Tell her yourself," said Bobby. "She's outside in the corridor waiting."

Gaunt sank on the bed and remained silent for a minute or two. Heaven alone knew how he longed to see her; but Heaven alone knew how keenly he desired that she should not be in any way associated with his trouble.

"I play this hand alone," he said to Bobby with a sad smile. "Tell your sister that I am sorry she came; that I am grateful to her; but that I shall be glad if she will go back home and forget that such a person as I ever existed."

"I'll tell her," said Bobby, "but—"

They talked, Bright and Bobby, one against the other. Of course they assured Gaunt of their belief in his innocence, and their assurance that his innocence would be proved. They were both very excited and very agitated; but Gaunt was quite cool and self-possessed. As a matter of fact, he was thinking of Decima; that she was there, near him, in the corridor! Bobby and Bright would have remained for any length of time, but at last Gaunt dismissed them.

Bright and Bobby, as agitated as when they had entered, left the cell, and Gaunt paced up and down.

Presently he heard a knock; the warder opened the door.

"A lady to see you, my lord," he said. He stood aside and Decima entered.

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### CHAPTER XXXI.

DECIMA came in and they stood looking at each other in silence. Gaunt could not have spoken or moved if his life had depended upon his doing so. And as he looked at her he saw, with a pang of remorse, the change that had taken place in her.

The face, the form, were girlish still ; but on the face was an expression which only comes to those who have passed the brook which divides girlhood from womanhood ; and in the lovely eyes was a look which told him all too plainly how much she had suffered.

But to the man whose heart ached with love for her, how beautiful she was ! How her presence seemed to bring a ray of sunlight, a glow of warmth into the cell ! And yet he would have done much to prevent her coming. It seemed to him that she suffered desecration by breathing the prison air, as if her purity were polluted by her surroundings.

He would have liked to take her in his arms and carry her outside, far away from the hateful, degrading place.

She looked at him steadily, with a grave sadness which he had never seen before in her eyes, and it smote him with an added remorse. He had found her an innocent, light-hearted girl ; it was he and his love that had robbed her youth of its brightness and its faith, and its innocence.

He met her gaze for an instant, then his eyes fell. She sighed. She had not offered him her hand—he had noticed that—and she stood apart from him as she spoke.

“I came at once—directly I heard,” she said.

Her voice thrilled through him, and yet how low and grave it was ; how different to that he remembered ! Was it Decima who was speaking, or an angel who had won her way to Heaven through the ordeal of sorrow and suffering ?

“I am sorry !” he said, hoarsely. “You—you should not have come ! This—this is no fit place for you !”

Commonplace words enough, but she knew the feeling, the emotion, which they masked.

“Ah, yes !” she said, with a faint smile. “They said at first I must not come ; but when I explained—” She stopped. “I knew you were not dead !” Her voice broke. “I—I felt that you were not. But—but I was glad when I heard !” Her eyes filled with tears, but she checked them. “Aunt Pauline came with me. She is in the corridor.”

“I will ask her to come in,” he said, scarcely knowing what he said.

“No ; do not. I told her that I wished to see you alone.”

He bowed his head.

"Why? I am sorry you have come! It—it hurts me to see you here—in this place."

"I know," she said, simply, as if she understood him fully.

"All through this—this awful business I have had one paramount desire—that you, that your name, should not be connected with it! I have brought you unhappiness enough, surely! You might have been spared this crowning misery!"

"I knew that you would think as you do, and that is why I came," she said in the same sweet, low voice.

He looked at her in helpless pain.

"I know that you would rather suffer anything, run any risk than that I should appear."

"Yes!" he said. "God knows I would! It seems to me that nothing else matters!"

"Oh, do not say that!" she broke in, with a catch in her voice. "Do not say that, when—when so much is at stake—your liberty, your safety—"

"You must not think of them!" he responded, quickly. "I have brought it all on myself."

"Ah, no, no!" she cried. "Not that! You did not do it—you are innocent!"

"Of the crime with which I am charged—yes!" he said; "but"—bitterly—"I am guilty of having wrecked your life—of having caused you unhappiness."

She shook her head slightly, with a faint smile that was infinitely sad.

"No; it—it was my fault. If you had never seen me—"

"Don't!" he broke in, hoarsely. "You know that no shadow of blame can rest on you. None—none whatever. No punishment I might suffer for anything I have done, or not done, could atone for the wrong I have done you. It is that thought that makes me say and feel that nothing that can happen to me can matter in the very least. I have only one desire, and that is that you should come to forget me, and all that concerns me; I dare not hope that you will ever forgive—"

Her head dropped, then she looked at him.

"I have forgiven!" she said, simply. "It—it was not hard. If—if you had not cared for me—"

He uttered a broken exclamation ; but she went on calmly, sadly, her eyes meeting his bravely, with a kind of sad resignation " You—you would not have asked me —have wished me to go with you."

" That—that does not palliate—" he said, hoarsely.

" Ah, yes ! " she said, and all the woman spoke in her tone. " Yes, I remember that, when—when I remember that night."

A faint color passed over her pale face quickly.

He hung his head.

" That is like you," he said, humbly, gratefully. " It was like you to come here to tell me this. And—God knows how great a comfort to me it is ! It will lighten the burden of my remorse. And—and you will go now ; you will not appear—take any part in this business ? "

" I must," she said in a low voice, but with a touch of firmness which was a full tribute to Lady Pauline's teaching.

" I know that you would rather run any risk to spare me, and it is because of that I have come to tell you that you must not let any thought of my comfort stand in the way of helping you. I was there that night ; I may be able to tell them something that may help to prove your innocence——"

He raised his head with a movement indicative of repudiation.

" You must not ! " he said. " I—I could not bear to see you in court before the public, with every eye upon you. I would rather"—

She shook her head.

" Tell me how I can help you," she said, breaking in upon his speech gently but firmly. " If I tell them all—all I know ; all that happened, it may be of use——"

He groaned and turned aside, that she might not see the agony on his face.

" It would not help me ! " he said, almost brusquely ; for it was difficult for him to speak. " It would not help me at all. And if it would, I could not let you do it There—there is enough evidence without yours——"

He stopped, for she had shuddered, and her face had grown even paler.

" Do you mean ? Ah, no, no ! They could not ! God

would not let them find you guilty ! He could not, could not ! ”

She began to tremble. With an effort, she mastered her emotion, and was calm again.

“ Something will be discovered, she said, struggling to steady her voice. “ It must be ! The person who—who is guilty will be found.”

“ Yes ; yes ! ” he said, with an assumption of confidence. “ No doubt he will be. The—the police are clever, and——”

“ Are you only saying it to give me courage ? ” she asked, scanning his face anxiously.

He forced a smile.

“ We will hope for the best,” he said. “ My lawyers will do their utmost on my behalf. You have been—very ill ? —”

He broke off abruptly, and with an infinite remorse and grief in his voice.

“ Yes ; I have been ill,” she said. “ But I am quite well and strong now. If—if I could only be sure you were safe ! ”

“ Do not think of me ! ” he said, quickly. “ But if you must, remember that you cannot help me ; that if you were dragged into the business it would only increase my unhappiness.”

“ You think of me—always of me ! Not of yourself ! ” she said almost to herself. “ Never of yourself.”

“ Do I not ? ” he said, bitterly. “ When have I not thought of myself and my selfish desires ? ”

She looked at him with a wistful tenderness.

“ Shall I tell you ? When you strove to make the poor people at Leafmore happier and more contented ; when you—when you went away lest—lest you should say to me what you said that night. When you gave up your place in the boat to another man. Ah, yes ! I have heard it all ; and—and—my heart has swelled with pride ! And that is not all. You were not thinking of yourself when you sent the money to save father and Bobby and me ! ”

Gaunt reddened, and bit his lip.

“ You know ? Who told you ? ”

“ No one ! ” she said. “ But do you think I could not guess ? ”

He looked aside for a moment. Then he said, with sad bitterness :

"And now, I suppose, you will refuse it—refuse anything, ever so small a thing—from my hands?"

"No," she said, simply. "I will not. I know that—that it would pain you. I wanted to refuse, until—until I thought it all over; then I saw that it would be wrong to do so. It would have been, as if—as if I had refused to—to forgive you."

He stretched out his hands.

"God bless you, Decima!" he said, in a broken voice. "You have found the way to ease my heart of its load!"

"I know!" she said, as simply as before. "Some day we shall pay it back. Aunt Pauline— But I will not let you think me ungrateful and churlish."

He could not speak for a moment: the exquisite sweetness of her reasoning overcame him as nothing else could have done.

"There is no one like you!" he said, at last, with a kind of reverential despair. "No one! Ah, how could I help loving you? Ah, forgive me!" for she had winced and shrank back—slightly enough but he had perceived it. "Forgive me!"

There was a world of grief and remorse in his voice, in his face. For he felt at that moment that, though the old barrier had been removed, his conduct had raised a new one. He loved her still, and she might love him still, but the gulf yawned between them, and he himself had dug it.

Lady Pauline came to the door. She inclined her head to Gaunt, but addressed Decima:

"Are you ready, Decima? The time has expired."

"Yes, aunt," said Decima, and with a sigh.

"I have to thank Miss Deane for coming here, Lady Pauline," Gaunt said as steadily as he could. "I have assured her that she cannot help me by—by appearing in court; that I most earnestly entreat her not to do so!"

Lady Pauline inclined her head again.

"My niece has only done her duty in coming to you, Lord Gaunt," she said in even tones, "a duty which I could not refuse to recognize."

He bowed with his old courteousness.

"Knowing all—" he paused.

"Yes," she said. "My niece has told me everything."

" You will not need any assurance of my remorse ; will not doubt my assertion that there is nothing I would not do or suffer to spare her a moment's unhappiness—discomfort ? " Lady Pauline regarded him solemnly.

" I believe in the sincerity of your desire to spare her, Lord Gaunt," she said ; " but it is part of our punishment that we are helpless to avert the consequences of our misdeeds from falling upon those who are innocent, and whom we most desire to shield."

" That is so," said Gaunt simply, and the commonplace assent was more eloquent of his pain and misery than a more ornate response would have been.

" Aunt ! " murmured Decima, appealingly.

" We will go," said Lady Pauline. " It is only fair and just that I should assure you of my conviction of your innocence of the awful crime laid to your charge, Lord Gaunt," she added.

Gaunt inclined his head. " Thank you, Lady Pauline. Yes, I am innocent of that ! " he said, quietly.

Lady Pauline went outside again, and Decima, who had been standing with an expression of pain in her lowered eyes, raised them to Gaunt's face.

" Good-by ! " she said in a low voice.

She did not hold out her hand, and that she did not do so hurt him. He did not know that she dared not run the risk of touching him !

" Good-by ! God bless and keep you ! " he said, almost in a whisper.

Her eyes rested upon his with an infinite sadness and tenderness, then she drew them away slowly, and with a sigh left the cell.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

WHEN Decima had left the cell, taking all the light and warmth with her, as it seemed to Gaunt, he sat on the bed with his face in his hands, thinking of every word she had said, recalling the sweet face, with its new expression of sadness and resignation.

He asked himself why Fate had sent him across her path, why Heaven permitted one of its angels to suffer as she had suffered, simply through loving him.

Alas! This kind of question is not only futile, but recoils upon the questioner. Why the innocent should suffer with the guilty; why the woman should suffer through her love for the man, are interrogations which remain unanswered, even by theologians, who are supposed to know everything,

Gaunt was so engrossed in thinking of Decima that he could scarcely turn his attention to his own affairs, though in all truth they were grave and serious enough.

Mr. Pelford brought Sir James, the great counsel, the next morning, and they went over the whole story and examined the evidence with a minuteness which wearied Gaunt. Perhaps he permitted this weariness to be seen, for Sir James got rather sharp.

"Look here, Lord Gaunt," he said, impressively, and no man could be more impressive than Sir James, when he liked. "I'm afraid you don't realize your position."

"That's what I say!" exclaimed Mr. Pelford.

"The evidence is very strong. The trial will take place in about three weeks. Unless we can discover the criminal, the perpetrator of this murder. I—well, I should not like to answer for the result. Of course I could have the trial put off."

"Pray do not!" said Gaunt. "Three weeks of suspense will be quite long enough. If you do not discover him in that time, he will remain undiscovered. I can give you no assistance beyond that which may be supplied by my statement of what occurred on the night I met my wife. Please don't think me indifferent or ungrateful for the effort you are making on my behalf. I have no desire to figure as the first Gaunt who had been hanged, I assure you; but I feel quite helpless, and when I am in that condition—"

He made a little weary gesture with his hand.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"We will do all we can. We must find out all that is possible to be discovered concerning the unhappy lady's movements since she parted from you. You know no details of her life of late, I suppose?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Gaunt, "excepting that she was living with her brother."

"We will send over to Monte Carlo," said Mr. Pelford.

"We will get all the information we can out of him, but we will not bring him over till the last moment; for the man makes a nuisance of himself." Then they went, and Sir James used strong language, outside the prison.

A little later Gaunt had a visit from Bobby; and Gaunt was glad to see him at any rate.

"Your sister has gone home?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," replied Bobby.

"It was good of her to come," said Gaunt; "but you must not let her come again. This is not a fit place for her. You will take care of her, Bobby?" he added in a low voice, and turning his head away.

"Aunt Pauline will do that," said Bobby. "I can't leave London till after—after the trial. I want to see you every day. I'm wretched when I'm not here!"

Gaunt put his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "You are indeed that 'friend in need,'" Bobby," he said.

Bobby's eyes grew moist.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?"

Gaunt shook his head. Then he said, as if he were glad to find something:

"Yes! The night I arrived in London, I met a man, a fellow-passenger on the unlucky Pevensey Castle. The poor fellow was in a wretched plight, and I took him to the hotel with me. He seemed fearfully ill—seriously ill, I should say, but he left the hotel the next morning before breakfast. I don't like the man, but I feel a strange interest in him, and I wish you'd go down to the hotel and see whether he has turned up again."

Only too glad of something to do, Bobby went off to Morlet's. He came back with the information that nothing more had been seen of Mr. Jackson. He had paid his bill before leaving, and had not returned to the hotel.

"I'm almost glad to get rid of him," said Gaunt; "but I hope no harm has come to him. He was dreadfully ill."

"It is the man you rescued isn't it?" asked Bobby.

"You can scarcely call it that," said Gaunt; "he took his chance in the boat with the rest."

"You gave up your place to him," faltered Bobby.

"Willingly enough!" remarked Gaunt, indifferently.

"I'm going off now, to help Pelford," said Bobby, as

he took his leave. "We're going to leave no stone unturned. We must find the guilty man!"

"And you will, I am sure, if he is to be found!" said Gaunt, gratefully.

As the day of the trial approached Deeima spent more of her time in her own room, and Lady Pauline began to dread that the girl would break down. But the determination to appear at the trial and help Lord Gaunt, if it were possible for her to help him, supported Decima.

The day of the trial arrived. The court was crowded, not only with the general public, but with many distinguished persons, for the interest in the case had revived and become intensified by the added romance of the shipwreck and Lord Gaunt's heroic conduct.

The public is as fickle as the wind. It had all along regarded Lord Gaunt as guilty, and at first had been deeply incensed against him; the public always is when the wrongdoer happens to be a person of rank. But although Lord Gaunt was still deemed guilty, popular feeling had swung round. After all, the unhappy woman had been a "bad lot." And then again she had been Lord Gaunt's wife, and with Englishmen there still lingers a trace of the old feeling—though they will not admit it—that a man has a right to do what he chooses with his wife.

And then the story of Gaunt's unselfish conduct on board the Pevensey Castle had touched the public in its tenderest part—its sentiment. It argued that a man who could so cheerfully risk his life for his fellow man ought certainly not be hanged—though it should be proven that he did kill his wife in a heat of passion.

So the court was crammed, and the sentiment which animated most of those present was that of sympathy with the accused, and the feeling grew much stronger when Lord Gaunt stepped into the dock.

Gaunt was a good-looking man, but he possessed that which is more valuable to a man than regularity of feature—that peculiar air which we call "distinguished," and which always impresses the individual or the crowd.

He was pale, of course, but he was perfectly calm, and though grave, did not appear at all anxious. Every eye was turned upon him, and he met the concentrated gaze

—that gaze which fills most of us, even under the most favorable circumstances, with nervous terror. Gaunt met it quite steadily. Only for one moment did his eyes falter and the expression of his face change; it was when his eyes rested upon the sweet pale face of the girl who, clad in Quakerish simplicity, sat beside Lady Pauline in an inconspicuous part of the court.

Decima met his glance, saw the color rise to his face, then leave it again; saw his lips twitch as if with a sudden pang of pain, and her own eyes filled with hushed tears, and her lips quivered. He turned away instantly, as if he could not bear to see her there; and she understood.

The venerable judge on the bench had been a friend of Lord Gaunt's father; among the titled and distinguished people present were many who knew Gaunt personally; all of them knew him by repute as a famous traveler, and a man absolutely without fear. The women sighed as they looked at him; the men exchanged glances of pity.

“Marriages are made in Heaven! Oh, are they?” remarked one man to another. “Just look at that chap! I suppose there isn't a better fellow in the world than Gaunt. I was at Eton with him, and I've known him all my life. He's as straight as a dart, and got the pluck of the very devil. He wouldn't hurt a fly in cold blood, and he thinks nothing of risking his life for some stranger on board the same ship. And yet that fellow's whole life is made miserable because he stood up before a parson for ten or twelve minutes, and remarked that he took a certain woman for his wife. Not only is his whole life made miserable, but he's going to be scragged because, driven pretty well mad, I dare say, by the woman, he puts an end to her!”

“Yes,” assented his friend. “Matrimony is the very deuce. But the ‘New Woman’ is going to abolish it, isn't she? If so, I shall vote for her all the time. I suppose there's no doubt about Gaunt's having done this?”

The other man shook his head. “I'm afraid not,” he said. And it was the general opinion.

The attorney-general was neither bitter nor vindictive, but his speech was necessarily a strong argument for the conviction of the prisoner, and all who heard it, even before the witnesses were put in the box, felt that the case was very black against Gaunt, and as the evidence was

skilfully marshaled by the prosecution, every one in court was convinced that unless Sir James, the counsel for the prisoner, was in possession of some very strong evidence to meet that of the prosecution the verdict would be one of "Guilty."

Gaunt sat erect, with his hands resting lightly on the edge of the dock, or now and again he leaned against the partition, with folded arms. He was not indifferent as to the result of this wordy war between the legal gentlemen who were fighting for and against him, but he was thinking, not so much of the coming verdict, but of the white-faced girl who sat with tightly-compressed lips and downcast eyes, which now and again she raised to his with a glance of infinite compassion and infinite sorrow.

The short day was drawing to a close, or, rather the light in the badly-windowed court was fading, when the case for the prosecution closed. As the last witness left the box, the audience—for they resembled the audience in a theater, in the closeness of their attention, and their eagerness to grasp every detail—the packed crowd drew a long breath.

Just below the dock stood a little group of Gaunt's friends. There were Bobby, and Bright, and Mr. Lang. They all turned and looked up at Gaunt with a smile which they endeavored to make encouraging; but Gaunt saw behind the smile their anxiety and apprehension. The attorney-general and Mr. Boskitt between them, aided by the evidence, had for the present convinced the jury of the prisoner's guilt.

Sir James rose, with his well-known air of quiet assurance and complete confidence in his client's innocence, and he spoke as if no man in his senses, certainly not the twelve intelligent gentlemen in the jury box, could for one moment be induced to believe that such a man as Lord Gaunt could be guilty of so cowardly a crime as the murder of a defenseless woman—even though that woman were his wife.

It was a magnificent speech, and it brought the tears to the eyes of many of the listeners. But though the jury might feel inclined to weep at the eloquent description of Lord Gaunt's ruined life, wrecked by his unfortunate

marriage, Sir James' speech had not, they felt, disposed of the evidence against the prisoner.

Sir James called witness after witness, and they one and all testified to the noble character of the prisoner, and declared their conviction that he was incapable of the crime with which he was charged. The evidence intensified the sympathy of the listeners, but, alas! it did not prove Lord Gaunt's innocence. Everything that could be proved in his favor was brought forward by Sir James, but how little it was, how small it appeared against the black mass of evidence which the attorney-general had brought against the accused!

Two men, standing not very far from each other in a corner of the court, felt as if the verdict had been already pronounced, and both their faces flushed with the anticipation of vindictive satisfaction. Both Mershon and Morgan Thorpe were thirsting for that one word "Guilty," and as they glanced at the grave face of the foreman of the jury they could almost fancy that the word, the fatal word, was already forming on his lips.

Gaunt himself was convinced that there was no hope. As the attorney-general began his reply to the defense, Gaunt drew himself up, and gripped the edge of the dock firmly. If Lady Pauline would only take Decima away.

As if she had heard his unuttered prayer, Lady Pauline at that moment whispered: "Come away now, Decima!"

But Decima shook her head and her hands strained together still more closely in her lap.

What was it the attorney-general was saying, "knocking," as one of the barristers whispered, "knocking with every word a fresh nail in the prisoner's coffin?"

"The evidence against the prisoner is overwhelming. The unhappy woman was stabbed in his rooms. She was found covered by his coat. The weapon with which the deed was done was his. No one else, no other man, entered that awful room that night."

At this point of his terrible eloquence he had paused, for there had come from the back of the court a hoarse and derisive laugh.

The attorney-general repeated the last words, "No other man entered that room that night!"

The laugh was repeated also.

The attorney-general stopped and looked round indignantly ; the usher cried "Silence!" The judge looked up sternly from his notes ; some of the ladies laughed hysterically. There was a confusion at the back of the court, from which the strange sound had proceeded ; a man's voice, thin and feeble, yet penetrating, came across the crowded room, as if he were addressing the judge.

The judge held up his hand.

"Silence!" he commanded ; then as the silence fell he said, "What is the meaning of this disturbance? Bring that disorderly person forward."

A policeman, drawing a man with him, pushed his way through the crowd. The man was pale and emaciated, and the effect of his pallor was increased by his red hair and bloodshot eyes.

"Trevor!" exclaimed Thorpe under his breath.

"Jackson!" thought Gaunt. "Has he gone mad? What will they do with the poor devil?"

But if Jackson were mad he concealed his insanity with admirable art. Of all present he was the most calm, saving, perhaps, the judge and the prisoner.

"Why have you made this disturbance?" asked the judge, sternly.

Trevor looked up at the bench and then around the court.

"I laughed!" he said. His tone was respectful enough, but it was suggestive of a kind of sullen contempt. He was breathing painfully, and his head was thrust forward, as if he were too weak to stand upright. "I laughed at the attorney-general's speech," he continued. "He said no other man besides Lord Gaunt went into the room that night, and I happen to know that one did."

Sir James rose quickly, and turned to Mr. Pelford.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

Mr. Pelford shook his head.

"I cannot tell you!" he replied with agitation.

The judge held up his hand to still the murmur which had arisen.

"Do you offer yourself as a witness?" he asked.

Trevor nodded, and coughed. He was got into the witness box amidst intense excitement.

The attorney-general rose.

"My lord, I need scarcely say that I am quite ignorant—that I know nothing of this person, nor of the evidence which he is about to give!"

Sir James rose.

"My lord," he began in anything but his usual self-possessed manner, "I am as ignorant of this person and his evidence as my learned friend; but my client, the prisoner at the bar, is desirous that the truth and all the truth shall be told respecting this terrible tragedy."

There was a murmur of applause, which was instantly suppressed.

"I myself will examine the witness," said the judge. "But perhaps it will be still better that we should permit him to make his statement."

The two eminent counsel bowed in concurrence.

"You say," said the judge, "that a man, other than the prisoner, entered his rooms at Prince's Mansions the night of the murder. Tell us what you know of the case and remember that you are under your oath."

Trevor leaned over the edge of the box.

"I say that a man entered Lord Gaunt's rooms that night. He called at the house in Cardigan Terrace and inquired for Mrs. Dalton."

A fit of coughing checked him for a time; when he had recovered from it he resumed, with difficulty, and still more hoarsely, "The man was told that Mrs. Dalton was confined to her room with a headache. He was turning the corner of the street when he saw her leave the house and get into a cab. He wanted to know where she was going; he called another cab and followed her—"

The attorney-general arose. He was going to say that this was not evidence; but the judge held up his hand and the attorney-general resumed his seat.

Trevor had not glanced at him, but waited stolidly until the judge signed to him to go on.

"He saw her go into Prince's Mansions. He thought she had gone to visit a man who lived there—a man he knew. He went into a public house and got a drink—several—then he went down to the Mansions. He meant to ring the bell, but he found the door ajar, and he went in. There was no one in the corridor; he went into the drawing-room. Mrs. Dalton was there—alone."

At this point the excitement in the court became so intense that a murmur arose which rendered the voice of the witness almost inaudible. Heads were craned forward in his direction, every eye was fixed upon him. Trevor seemed utterly indifferent still.

"She was alone. The man and she had some talk. He loved her; he was jealous. A few nights before she had promised to marry him. That night, in Lord Gaunt's rooms, she laughed at the man; she told him that she was married already; had been married all the time, and had been fooling him. More than that, she had been helping her brother to rob him. The man went mad, for a moment and he stabbed her!"

A cry escaped the crowded court. Decima's hands were stretched out toward Gaunt for an instant, then clasped on her bosom. Trevor was quite unmoved by the excitement surging around him, and he went on in a hollow and impassive voice:

"There was a foolish kind of dagger lying on the ground near him, and he caught it up and stabbed her with it. She was dead in an instant; it must have gone straight into her heart. He laid her on the sofa, and covered her with a fur coat he found lying there. Then he left the rooms, and by luck no one saw him."

A fit of coughing seized him again at this point. He went on after a moment or two, holding his blood-stained handkerchief in his wasted and twitching hand.

"No one saw him and he got away. No one would ever have suspected him, and an innocent man would have suffered. But certain things happened. The innocent man saved the real murderer's life. The cabman who drove him to the street in which the Mansions are, is in court." He glanced toward the end of the room. "So is the barmaid who served him with the liquor. They have not come forward before because the cabman thought the case was clear against Lord Gaunt, and didn't want to be troubled, and the barmaid— Well she had no reason to connect the man with the case."

He paused, struggling for breath.

Sir James rose. He was very pale, and his usually firm voice shook during the first few words.

"All through this statement you have spoken of 'the

man.' You have charged some one with the murder of Lady Gaunt. I ask you the name of the man you thus charge ! "

Trevor put his handkerchief to his mouth and wiped his blood-stained lips. "Ralph Trevor," he said in a hollow voice. "I am the man."

No one who was present in court has ever been able to give a clear and connected account of what followed, though every one had a confused impression of seeing and hearing several witnesses in the box after Trevor had been carried out. But the impression is blurred by that which followed, when the jury, without leaving their seats, returned a verdict of "Not Guilty!" and the judge in a few faltering words of sympathy, pronounced Lord Gaunt a free man.

The officials found it utterly impossible to check the roar of applause with which the crowd received the verdict, and the judge's expression of sympathy, and Gaunt found himself carried, swept as it were, into the open air, a free man indeed !

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### CHAPTER XXXIII.

EIGHTEEN months after the acquittal of Lord Gaunt and the death of Ralph Trevor—he died in prison within a week of the trial—there was a garden party at Lady Roborough's.

It must be confessed that the usual garden party is a deadly, dull affair—who has not suffered at it?—but Lady Roborough's was an exception to the dreary rule. She was a clever old lady, far too clever and good-natured to get together a mob of people and permit them to bore themselves to death through the hottest and most trying part of a summer's day. At Roborough you were sure to find plenty of shade—the gardens were the pride of the county—and plenty of amusement. There were four capital tennis courts, for instance, a wonderful bowling green, a lake with boats, tents with an unlimited supply of tea, ices and more solid refreshments, a first-rate band, not too loud, in the open air, and music in the drawing-room, if the day should be wet—as it sometimes is in England—and there were shrubberies and shady walks

in which one could flirt or smoke the surreptitious cigarette in safety.

Lady Roborough, looking scarcely a day older, moved about the grounds, applauding the tennis players, cowering at the flirting, cautioning the boating parties to "be careful," and seeing that no one went without the precious cup of tea. Now and again she persuaded herself to take a rest, and seated just inside the big marquee, whence like a general she could survey her forces, she indulged in a little gossip with some of the older guests, who liked the shaded tents better than the tennis, the boats or even the shrubberies.

"A great success, as usual, my dear," remarked Lady Ferndale, who sat next her.

"Everybody seems very happy, at any rate, they appear to be amusing themselves," admitted Lady Roborough. "The next best thing to being young is to be old enough to like to watch young people."

Lady Ferndale smiled.

"You must be enjoying yourself, then," she said, "for there are plenty here. How pretty some of the girls are! Do you think any of us were half as good-looking?"

"I can answer for one, my dear," responded Lady Roborough, touching her friend's arm affectionately. "But there are some very good-looking young people here this afternoon. If I were inclined to be vulgar—which, by the way, I very often am—I should say it was quite a 'Beauty Show!'"

"How awful!" exclaimed Lady Ferndale; but she laughed. "I wonder where that impressionable man, my husband, is. I have not seen him for the last hour. I suppose he is flirting with some of your pretty girls. Really, I am inclined to feel jealous!"

She pretended to sigh, and Lady Roborough smiled.

"You need not be, my dear," she remarked. "Lord Ferndale is delightfully general in his admiration. There is always safety in numbers, you know."

"Yes, that is my only consolation!" said Lady Ferndale, with mock gravity. "Though Edward has concentrated his attention upon Miss Deane of late. Is that he talking to her now?"

Lady Ferndale was short-sighted.

Lady Roborough put on her eyeglasses, and surveyed Decima and her male companion.

"No that is young Illminster," she said.

There was a certain significance in her tone, and Lady Ferndale glanced at her.

"What a sweet girl she is!" she said, musingly. "Now, I really don't think any of us were quite so lovely as she is," she added.

"I suppose she is. Oh, yes, of course she is," assented Lady Roborough, "but to tell you the truth, I never think of her prettiness when I am with her. There is something about her that ' passeth show,' as our friend Hamlet says."

"I know," said Lady Ferndale. "She fascinates me, and I quite sympathize with Edward; indeed, I'm rather more in love with her than he is."

"And yet," said Lady Roborough, still looking toward Decima, "there are girls who are as beautiful, and certainly more clever and accomplished. For instance, you scarcely ever heard her say anything brilliant or witty."

"I don't know that I particularly care for brilliant or witty girls," interpolated Lady Ferndale.

"And she has few accomplishments. Her charm is a nameless one, or difficult to describe. It must be—do you think it is her 'goodness?'" she asked, doubtfully.

"Sometimes I think it is. She is awfully good; you know she was Lady Pauline's ward or charge. And yet there isn't a trace of the Pharisee in her."

"Perhaps it is her gentleness," suggested Lady Ferndale. "So few girls have that nowadays. I'm afraid it's rather unfashionable. Girls like to be thought fast and 'smart.' Dear me, how I hate that word!—and are ashamed of possessing that inconvenient thing—a heart. Sometimes I'm inclined to think that in the next generation or two it will be only the men who will be capable of the 'emotions.' Now Decima Deane is like a sensitive leaf."

"Too sensitive, I'm afraid," said Lady Roborough.

"Ah, yes! and yet how admirably self-contained and self-possessed she is! I like to sit and watch her face—it is like a mirror, and yet so grave and calm, and—what do you call it?—not impassive, but——"

"All serene," suggested Lady Roborough. Lady Ferndale laughed.

"That sounds like slang!" she said. "But I see you know what I mean. She looks to me like one of those rare lilies which have stood the strain of wind and rain, and though they still stand erect, show something of the ordeal through which they have passed."

"There is nothing faded about our lily, though," said Lady Roborough. "She is still a girl, and as fresh as a newly-opened blossom."

"Yes. Is she quite well now?" asked Lady Ferndale. "She was so very ill, and looked so pale and frail for so long that I began to fear that the lily would not hold up its head again."

"She is better—quite well, I think. She is really very strong; indeed, she must be, or she would not have pulled through. She was playing tennis just now—a hard game, and she was on the winning side."

"I wonder she has not married," said Lady Ferndale. "I am glad her engagement with that man, Mr. Mershon, was broken off. What has become of him—do you know?"

Lady Roborough shook her head.

"No; he left The Firs more than a year ago. It is for sale, you know. I don't know what has become of him, but I think I heard that he had settled in some place on the continent. Yes," she went on, after a pause, "it is strange that Decima does not marry. She has had one or two offers during the last twelve months, I know, though she—you know her!—has, of course, not told me of them."

"And there will be a third directly," said Lady Ferndale. "That is Lord Illminster with her, is it not?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, he will propose to her. He is dying to do so, for he is very much in love with her. It is an open secret; indeed, he has told me, and he has asked me to help him. But I declined. Decima is not like most girls; and one feels that one would be treading on very delicate ground if one ventured to play the part of match-maker with her."

Lady Ferndale nodded sympathetically.

"I should not like to venture—I could not! Do you think she will accept him?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think she may ; at others I think not."

"That's very non-committal, my dear !" responded Lady Ferndale, with a smile.

"It expresses what I feel exactly. But Decima, without meaning it, of course—for she is simplicity itself—is rather deceptive. For instance, sometimes she will be quite—quite friendly to Lord Illminster, and he will go about looking as happy as a sandboy ; and presently he will come to me and make a dolorous moan, and complain that Miss Deane has either passed him in the road with a cold bow, or answered him so absently, with such a pre-occupied and dreamy manner, that he is sure there is no hope for him."

"Poor fellow ! How I pity him ! Imagine being really in love with Decima Deane ! How a man could suffer !"

"Oh, he suffers badly enough," assented Lady Roborough, placidly. "But I don't feel for him so much. I think of Decima. I want her to be happy."

"And she is not now ?"

Lady Roborough looked doubtful, and rather sad.

"I don't know. I'm afraid not. That absent, dreamy look, which makes poor Lord Illminster so wretched, is too often on her face. It comes quite suddenly, just after she has been talking and laughing quite brightly, as if she had suddenly remembered something. The expression passes quickly enough sometimes, but it has been there and one cannot forget it."

"Wasn't—wasn't there something between her and Lord Gaunt ?" said Lady Ferndale, hesitatingly.

"I don't know. They were very much together—she helped him in the village. Indeed, all the great improvement— But you know all about that as well as I do. But Lord Gaunt was so much older, and was married—though we did not know it. Oh, no, there was nothing—how could there be ?"

"There was something said—hinted—at the trial !"

"Oh, no ! She chanced to call upon her brother when Lord Gaunt went to his rooms that night. There was some suggestion, some hint of a love affair between them ; but it must have been groundless. Otherwise why is he not here ?"

"Yes; nothing has been seen of him since the trial," remarked Lady Ferndale.

"No," said Lady Roborough. "He is abroad in Africa; one reads about him every now and then. I don't suppose he will ever come back to England."

"So Edward says. What a pity it is that a place like Leafmore should be shut up! There seems a Fate in it. Now, I pity Lord Gaunt. I liked him so much."

"So did we all, and we all pity him," said Lady Roborough, with a sigh. "But what will you? There is one great mistake which a man cannot commit—an unfortunate marriage; and he can never dodge the consequences. It is the one piece of folly which is always attended by its Nemesis."

"Poor Lord Gaunt! And Decima lives all alone with her father. Lady Pauline has gone, has she not?"

"Oh, yes, some time ago. Yes. Decima is alone with her father. Her brother is at Sandhurst. He passed last March. He worked terribly hard, and won his way back into all our hearts before he left."

"It must be a great responsibility for her," said Lady Ferndale. "Mr. Deane is more absorbed in his fads than ever, isn't he? I saw him for a few minutes, once, when I called, and I think he was scarcely conscious of my presence."

"Yes, it is a great responsibility," said Lady Roborough. "But Decima is not the girl to shirk it. No daughter could be more loving and devoted."

"What a wife some happy man will have! I hope he will be Lord Illminster; he is a fine young fellow, and it would be a good match."

"Hush, she is coming!" said Lady Roborough, warningly, as Decima came alone across the lawn, with her racket in her hands. "Well, my dear, what have you done with Lord Illminster?" asked the old lady. "Come into the shade."

She took Decima's hand and drew her into the chair beside her, and kept the small hand, and patted it caressingly. Every one felt a strong temptation to pat and caress the girl.

"Lord Illminster has gone to play tennis," said Decima. "I was down for the set, but I felt rather tired, and knew

he would lose if I played ; so I asked him to get a stronger partner."

" For which he was very grateful, I'm sure," remarked her ladyship, dryly.

" Oh, yes," said Decima, innocently. " He plays so well ; it would have been a pity to make him lose his set."

" Yes, a great pity," assented Lady Roborough as dryly as before. " Will you have some tea, my dear ? "

She looked round for one of the neat maid-servants who were in attendance, but Decima rose.—" I'll get a cup. And may I bring some for you and Lady Ferndale ? "

" Isn't that like her ! " said the old lady, when Decima was out of hearing. " You can never, by any chance, tempt her to think of herself only. Thank you, my dear," as Decima came back with the maid bearing the tray. " And have you been enjoying yourself ? "

" Yes, very much," said Decima, with her soft, bright smile. " It is so lovely here, and every one is so happy that it makes one happy just to be with them. And I have been on the lake."

" Yes ? Who rowed you, dear ? "

" Lord Illminster," said Decima, as innocently and unconsciously as before. " And I played two sets, and Lord Illminster tried to teach me bowls, but I was very stupid and awkward—"

" Yes, I hope he wasn't angry."

" Angry ? Lord Illminster ! " Decima laughed. " Oh, no ; I don't think he could be ; he is always so patient and kind."

" And when did you hear from your brother, Decima ? " asked Lady Roborough, changing the subject with suspicious abruptness.

" Oh, yesterday. Such a delightful letter ! It was almost as if Bobby were talking. I don't think any one in the world can be funnier than he is, when he chooses. Yes, it was just like hearing him talk. And he is so popular, one can see ! Let me try and remember some of the things he says—but you want to hear him say them."

She stopped suddenly and rather shyly, for she was always rather carried out of herself when Bobby was on the tapis. A young man had sauntered up behind the three ladies.

"Weren't you speaking of Lord Gaunt just now, Lady Ferndale, and asking if any one had heard of him? I happened to hear you mention his name, and I thought you would like to know——"

Lady Roborough looked up at his face quickly, and with the expression which a lady's face wears when she wishes to silence the speaker; but the young man was rather shortsighted, and did not notice her look. Alas! he was young, and with most of us it is not until we have reached "forty year," that we learn the full significance of a lady's glance!"

"I've just heard of him," he went on, fully convinced that he was making himself agreeable, and imparting keenly-desired intelligence. "One of the men of his exploring party—you know Lord Gaunt is exploring the source of the Oawanji?"

"Yes, oh, yes, we know," said Lady Roborough, rather curtly, very curtly, for her; but he blundered on. He was not a native of the place, but only a visitor at one of the neighboring houses, and had probably not heard the name of the young lady who sat so quietly beside the two old ladies, and had certainly never heard of it in connection with Lord Gaunt.

"This man dined at the Travelers',—the club—you know——"

"We've all heard of the Travelers', Mr. Jones," said Lady Ferndale, coldly.

"Yes," Mr. Jones fixed his eyeglass. "In fact, we were giving him a little dinner in honor of his return. He came home on sick leave, you know. He told us a lot about the expedition, but nearly all his talk was of Lord Gaunt. It seems that the party had a particularly rough time of it; no end of perils and privations, you know. I forget how many days they were without food and water; and once or twice they had had to fight their way through friendly tribes—natives, you know; and they can fight. And he says that Lord Gaunt is a—a regular brick. That was his word, you know, and according to him it is just the right one."

Lady Roborough glanced at Deeima. She was leaning back in her chair, and her face was pale; but her eyes were not downcast, but fixed before her, and the dreamy ex-

pression Lady Roborough had spoken of was in them. She seemed as if she were far away, as if she were scarcely listening.

"He says," continued Mr. Jones, who was enjoying himself exceedingly, "that Lord Gaunt is simply worshiped by them all; certainly he—the man who has come back—is mad enough about him!—and that whenever there is anything in the way of hard times or fighting, Lord Gaunt always takes the lion's share. He says that in his opinion Lord Gaunt doesn't know what fear is. Always in the front when they were attacked, and never down on his luck for a moment! He says that Lord Gaunt marched at the head of his party for three days with a wound in his thigh that would have sent any other man to hospital for three months——"

Lady Roborough broke in at this point, with a kind of desperation.

"Oh, thank you very much, Mr. Jones!" she said, sweetly—too sweetly. "It's very good of you to tell us this, but—but would you be so kind as to go over to the band and ask them to play again?"

Mr. Jones looked rather bewildered at this decapitation of his little story, but he bleated blandly:

"Certainly! certainly! Delighted, Lady Roborough!" and took himself off.

Decima sat a full minute without moving; then her lips parted, and a long sigh escaped them softly—so softly that only Lady Roborough heard it—and she glanced at the watch at her waist—a present from Bobby.

"It is time for me to go, Lady Roborough," she said, and she spoke quite naturally, and even with a smile. "My father always likes me to be home a little before dinner, and indeed," smiling, "if I were not, he would not get dressed!"

"And what is the wonderful invention, Decima?"

Decima smiled again, but only for an instant, as she replied, gently:

"It is something for extinguishing fires, I think. I don't know quite; but I think it is a kind of shell which you throw into the flames, and it explodes."

"Sounds as if it were more likely to cause fire than to quench it," remarked Lady Roborough. "Tell them to

bring a carriage round for Miss Deane, please," she said to one of the servants.

"Oh, no! I can walk," said Decima.

"I've no doubt you can; but you won't, my dear," said Lady Roborough, dryly. "My dear Decima, you are too accustomed to having your own way. And so you grow selfish and self-opinionated."

A look of alarm and penitence began to steal over the sweet face, and Lady Roborough exclaimed:

"You little goose!" and drawing the face down to her, kissed it tenderly.

As she leaned back in the carriage Decima closed her eyes, and pictured Gaunt fighting his way at the head of the weary and fever-stricken expedition; thought of him "suffering in silence and in strength," and her lips murmured his name and a prayer for him, as the tears stole down her cheeks.

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#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONE evening a fortnight later Decima dined at the Ferndales'. It had not been a dinner party or she would not have gone without her father. The Ferndales were very fond of her—who was not!—and she had spent a very enjoyable evening; Lady Ferndale had made much of her and Lord Ferndale had exerted himself to amuse her. Their daughter was married, and the Ferndales were quite ready and anxious to take her into their girl's absent place. They had pressed her to stay the night, but she had come home because she knew that even if her father did not miss her that he could not be left.

She saw the light burning in his workroom as she went up the path, and she went straight to him.

He had not dressed for dinner that night, and he looked more untidy and dusty even than usual. Two gas jets were flaring away, and he was standing at his bench filling some glass tubes with a liquid which he poured from an iron retort.

"Have you not finished, father?" she said. "It is very late, dear!"

"Is it?" he said, pushing his unkempt hair aside; "I didn't know. I've been busy—very busy. This is a

wonderful idea of mine, Decima! Wonderful! It surpasses anything I have hitherto done. It will simply revolutionize the present system of dealing with fires."

"I am very glad, dear," said Decima. "But will you not go to bed now? Let me turn out the lights."

"Presently—presently!" he said. "This invention of mine is simplicity itself. Of course, there are plenty of hand grenades, and—er—glass bombs in the market; but this is something quite new, and its action is totally different to that upon which the others depend. You see this tube? It contains a fluid—which of course, is my secret; it's marvelous that I should hit upon it! It possesses most extraordinary qualities."

"It smells very strange and—and rather nasty," said Decima. "I hope it isn't dangerous, dear!"

"Dangerous!" he said impatiently. "Oh, no! That is, it could only be dangerous in the hands of ignorant persons, but I intend to have full directions for its use pasted on each tube. All you have to do in the event of fire, is to throw one of the tubes, not at the flames—there might be some small danger then, I admit—not at the flames but at the point which they would reach if they remained unchecked. A slight explosion then takes place, the flames are dispersed, choked, so to speak, and your fire, however fierce, is extinguished. I have been making some experiments to-night—I will show you——"

He was about to light a roll of paper at the gas jet, but Decima held his arm.

"Not to-night and in the crowded room, father!" she pleaded. "Show me to-morrow in some safer place, in the open air. Go to bed now, dear, you look tired."

"I am not at all tired," he said, "and there is not the least need for apprehension or alarm, as I could prove to you in a moment. But I will show you to-morrow. Wait one moment," he added, as Decima turned out one of the gas-jets. He began to put the evil-smelling things aside, but paused and pushed his hand through his hair. "There was something I wanted to tell you," he said; "I can't think what it was. It was important, too. Dear me! I can't remember for the moment." He stared at her vacantly, then went on as if he had suddenly remembered. "Ah, yes! Lord Illminster called this afternoon."

"Lord Illminster?" said Decima, with some surprise. "Why did he call? He has never been here before. What did he want?"

His eyes and hands wandered toward the precious tubes, and Decima had to repeat her question.

"Eh?" he said. "Ah, yes! He came to see you as well as me!"

"To see me?" said Decima. "Oh, about the archery meeting, I suppose? Lord Illminster asked me to help."

"No; it wasn't about archery," said Mr. Deane; "at least, I don't think he mentioned the word 'archery'—he may have done; it's quite possible. He talked a great deal, and seemed a remarkably pleasant and well-informed young man. When I say 'well-informed,' I mean on general subjects. I could not get him to understand any of my inventions. But he admitted very modestly that his scientific education had been neglected. No! the purport of his visit was to ask me if I would give my consent to his proposing to you."

"Father!" exclaimed Decima, her face growing red for a moment.

"Yes," said Mr. Deane, as if they were discussing an unimportant detail. "You seem surprised. Were you not aware of his intentions?"

"No!" said Decima, more to herself than to him. "I never thought—never suspected—"

"He made his request in an extremely nice manner," said Mr. Deane, turning to the bench, and arranging some tools absently; "and I am quite sure that he is very much in earnest. As I've said, he seems to me an exceedingly pleasant and agreeable young man."

"What—what did you say, father?" faltered Decima.

"Oh, I gave my consent," he said.

"Oh, father!" she breathed. "Why did you—how could you? I—"

"Why not?" said Mr. Deane, staring at her. "Surely you can have no objection to him, Decima? He is young, and I think from what little I saw of him, good-looking. He is an earl—or is the Illminster's a barony? I forget. And I think he said that the estate was a large one, and that there would be proper settlements. In fact, I inferred from his remarks, that he would leave that detail

to the lawyers. I told him that it was quite unimportant, because this invention of mine would place you far beyond the need of any settlement—that, in fact, you would probably be one of the richest heiresses in England. He is coming to-morrow to see you ; and, really, Decima, I think you might do well to accept him. You are still young, absurdly young, but not too young to be married ; and now that you have broken your engagement with Mr. Mershon——” His mind wandered, and he ruffled his hair, and stared at her vacantly. “ Yes, I should advise you to accept Lord Illminster.

Decima was pale now, and her face was very sad.

“ I—I cannot, father ! ” she said, in a low voice.

“ No ? ” he said, calmly. “ Why not ? ”

“ I do not—love—care for him,” she said. “ He is very good and kind—but I could not marry him. I shall never marry any one.” She smiled wanly. “ I am always going to stay with you, dear, and take care of you.”

“ That’s absurd,” he said, pettishly. “ You speak as if I were a child and incapable of taking care of myself ! And, as a matter of fact, I don’t suppose there is a more practical man in the world than I am. You had better tell Lord Illminster, when he comes to-morrow that you accept.”

“ I will tell him— No, I will write to him. Come now, father.”

She extinguished the other gas-jet, after looking round carefully, and led him away. He mandered up and down the drawing-room for some time, talking, not of Lord Illminster and his proposal, which he had already completely forgotten, but of his last invention for the extinction of fire, but after awhile Decima got him up to his room and in the solitude of her own was free to think of Lord Illminster’s proposal. She had had no suspicion of it. She regarded herself as so different from other girls, as one to whom marriage was an impossibility, that she had unconsciously felt that others also must so regard her. She had loved one man with all her heart and soul, and though she could never be his wife, she must go on loving him while life lasted. She should probably never see him again, but she was his still. She was sorry

for Lord Illminster; sorry that she, all unwittingly, had been so friendly with him.

She wrote a short letter to Lord Illminster, a letter of refusal, couched in the gentlest phrases; but definite. She could not have slept with the letter unwritten, and having written it she dismissed him from her mind and, with her last waking thoughts, thought of the man she loved, but whom she should never marry.

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That same evening Mr. Bright happened to be at Leafmore station. He was going to the next one down the line to see one of the tenants, and he was getting into the train when he stopped and started back, for Lord Gaunt alighted from the first-class carriage next that which Bright was about to enter.

Bright stared at him speechlessly as the train slowed away from the station.

“Lord Gaunt!” he gasped.

Gaunt extended his hand with a smile. He was thin and very brown, but he looked well and extremely fit, as if the privations under which he had gone had not told upon the Herculean strength which seemed the birthright of his race.

“Surprised you, eh, Bright?” said Gaunt, as Bright wrung his hand.

“I’d not the least idea!” stammered Bright, overwhelmed with astonishment and delight.

“I meant to write,” said Gaunt, “but I only had time to catch the train.”

“When did you come back and are you quite well?” asked Bright. “I’m so confused!”

Gaunt smiled and laid his hand upon Bright’s shoulder.

“I reached London last night, and I’m perfectly well, thanks. You’re looking very well, Bright, I’m glad to see.”

“There’s no carriage,” said Bright, confusedly. “Shall I get a fly?”

“Don’t trouble,” said Gaunt. “I want to go to the Hall to get my old rifle and one or two other things: we’ll walk, if you don’t mind. I’ve been cooped up in the train and on board ship so long that I shall be glad to stretch my legs.”

They left the station and proceeded in the direction of

Leafmore, Bright wiping his brow, and now and again looking from right to left in a bewildered way.

"This is such a surprise, Lord Gaunt," he said. "But I needn't tell you how glad I am to see you—how glad they will all be to see you back safe and sound. Of course we have read all about the expedition in the papers. It's been a wonderful success!"

"Well, I suppose it has," said Gaunt, quietly. "We have traced the river to its source, and connected it with a couple of lakes big enough to hold the navies of the world, and we have opened up a new channel for British commerce. Oh, yes, it has been a success, I suppose."

"And now I hope you have come home to settle down, Lord Gaunt," said Bright, earnestly. "You have done quite enough for your country, and I trust you will rest upon your laurels."

Gaunt smiled rather wearily.

"I've only come back for a few things, Bright," he said. "I return to Africa by the next vessel. Where can I stay to-night? I should like to sleep at the Hall, if I can."

"Certainly—certainly!" replied Bright. "There are some servants there, and the place is in order. I thought it possible that you might come back at any moment, and I have been prepared; but you won't think of leaving us again, Lord Gaunt?"

"I must," said Gaunt. "I'm sorry."

Bright sighed. As they reached the village, Gaunt looked round with evident interest.

"You have completed all the improvements, Bright, I see," he said. "There are the new schools and the cottages. They look comfortable."

"Yes, my lord," said Bright. "Everything has been done, I hope, as you wished it, and I need not say that the people are very grateful. The place is quite changed. It is a model village. And we have to thank you and Miss Deane for it."

At the mention of Decima's name, Gaunt winceed, his face grew grave, and he was silent for the rest of the way.

Their appearance at the Hall created a sensation and a commotion. Gaunt spoke to some of the old servants, and with Bright went straight to the library.

"Now, just tell me all the news, Bright," he said.

"Don't forget that I've only just landed, that I am a stranger in the land. How is everybody? How is—how are the Deanes? How is Miss Deane?"

He turned away to the window as he spoke.

"They are very well," replied Bright. "Bobby is at Sandhurst —"

"I am very glad," said Gaunt. "He will make a capital soldier. And—Miss Deane?"

His face was still turned away.

"She is very well," answered Bright. "I saw her this morning. She is still the guardian and ministering angel of the place."

Gaunt nodded.

"And—and—is still unmarried?"

"Oh, yes," said Bright, with a smile: "but that's entirely her fault. She has had two offers, to my knowledge. But I don't think she will remain single long."

Gaunt sank into a chair and sat with downcast eyes.

"Why do you think so?" he asked, moving the books on the table mechanically.

"I think she will be Lady Illminster before long," said Bright. "His lordship has been paying her a great deal of attention lately, and it is evident that he is very much in love with her."

"Illminster?" said Gaunt, looking up quickly, and with a tightening of the lips. "Who is he? I forget. What sort of a man is he?"

"He came into his title on the death of his uncle since you left. He is a very nice young fellow and in every way desirable."

"I am very glad," said Gaunt in a low voice. "And you think that Miss Deane will accept him?"

"I think so," said Mr. Bright.

Then he began to talk about the estate. Gaunt listened, but absently, and presently he rose and said:

"I think I will go and change, Bright. It will be quite pleasant to get into evening dress. You will dine with me to-night?"

Mr. Bright accepted. Gaunt rose and left the room, and Mr. Bright went and interviewed the cook. The result was a very nice little dinner, which Mr. Bright would have enjoyed if Lord Gaunt had displayed any in-

terest in it; but Gaunt seemed to have little or no appetite. He seemed disinclined to talk, though quite willing to listen to all that Mr. Bright had to say. Whenever Mr. Bright referred to the Deanes, Gaunt was attention itself, but other subjects attracted little of his attention. Bright endeavored to draw Lord Gaunt on the subject of the exploration, but Gaunt courteously refused to be drawn. He made light of the privations and perils which the expedition had gone through, and said nothing of his own share in the undertaking. Any one listening to him would have thought that the affair was quite a commonplace business—unworthy of notice.

Bright at last said "Good-night."

"I shall see you in the morning, Lord Gaunt," he said.

"Oh, yes," said Gaunt. "But I shall go by the early train."

When Bright had gone, Gaunt left the room, and went on the terrace with a cigarette. She was going to be married to Lord Illminster! And why not? He hoped that the young fellow was all that Mr. Bright had described him. He hoped that he would be worthy of her. Ah, no! No man could be worthy of his girl-love—of his Decima!

He went down the steps from the terrace, and sauntered through the park into the road. From there he could just see the chimneys of the Woodbines.

She was there—asleep, and he was here. But what a wide gulf yawned between them!

And she was going to be married! Ah, well, that was quite right. It was as it should be. She was young and beautiful, and this young fellow— Well, it was right that she should marry one who was young and well-favored. A wave of bitterness swept over him. He tried to crush down the love of her that rose in his heart. He would go in the morning; he would not see her. He would go back to Africa to meet the death which would come sooner or later—sooner, he hoped.

As he turned away toward the hall he saw a sharp light spring into the sky. It seemed to come from the spot at which he had been gazing, from the Woodbines.

He stopped and looked earnestly in the direction of the light. It grew and expanded, and there was the sound

of an explosion. He ran up the hill, and looked earnestly, anxiously, in the direction of the flames, for there were flames now and the sky was red above the spot from which they sprang.

It was a fire—and at the Woodbines ! He set off running.

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### CHAPTER XXXV.

GAUNT ran across the lawn, and climbing the park fence, got into the road. As he went he was hoping that it might not be the Woodbines, but a hayrack or rick near it, but when he had gone another hundred yards or so, he saw that it was the Deanes' house that was on fire.

Several other persons were running in the same direction, and by the time he had gained the front gate a crowd had collected, and was shouting and rushing about excitedly.

Gaunt pushed his way through and caught a man, the nearest to him, by the arm.

“Are they all out—safe ?” he asked.

Before the man could reply, Mr. Bright came running down the path from the burning house.

“Is that you, Lord Gaunt ?” he panted, then turned and addressed the crowd. “Some of you run down to the farm and bring up a ladder—the longest you can find ; bring two, and some rope. Has any one gone for the engine ?”

“Yes—yes, sir !” replied a voice.

“Are they all out, Bright ?” demanded Gaunt.

He spoke quietly and calmly enough, but he looked from Bright to the house with a terrible anxiety.

“I—I don't know ! I have only just arrived,” replied Bright. “I saw you get over the fence. The servants are out and safe. I saw them just now—there they are, and Mr. Deane—he was here just now.”

“And Decima—Miss Deane ?” said Gaunt impatiently.

Mr. Bright shook his head.

“I haven't seen her ! Has any one seen Miss Deane ?” he shouted.

There was a silence as the crowd looked from one to the other ; then the cook pushed her way up to Bright, wringing her hands and crying.

"Oh, where is the young mistress—where is Miss Decima?" she wailed. "I can't find her! We—we thought she had come out with us; but I can't find her in the crowd."

Gaunt took her by the shoulder.

"Don't be afraid," he said, quietly. "Tell me—which room?"

The girl stopped wailing and crying for a moment.

"The back room—at the top, my lord. Miss Decima is sleeping there for a night or two; her own room is being done up."

"Show me!" said Gaunt, quickly. She ran round to the back of the house and pointed to a window of the top room.

"That's it, my lord! Oh my poor young mistress!"

The night had grown dark and a slight drizzle had commenced. The fire had not reached the back of the house as yet, though it was spreading rapidly, and he could not see anything at the window. He noticed that there were iron bars to it; the room had been used as a nursery by a former tenant.

Gaunt shouted "Decima!" but no answer came, and he ran round to the front again. The house was an old one, and having been built when timber was cheap and jerry building unknown, there was plenty of wood in it. The flames had caught at the thick beams and quarterings, and the whole front of the house was a sheet of flame.

One of the men had brought an axe and had broken in the front door, and the draught was driving the fire up the staircase and through the lower rooms fiercely.

But Gaunt did not hesitate a moment. Decima might have escaped and be safe somewhere in the crowd, but he would not leave it to chance. He meant going into the house. Putting his arm up before his eyes he ran toward the door.

Bright saw him, and sprang forward.

"Where are you going, my lord?" he demanded. "You can't go inside—it's impossible!"

"Have you found Miss Deane?" asked Gaunt, over his shoulder.

"No!" said Bright. "But you can't go in—it's certain death!"

Gaunt broke from him, and ran into the house. A

volume of flame and smoke surrounded him and shut him from Bright's sight. The crowd roared with excitement and yelled, "Come back! Come back!" and some of the women screamed. Gaunt with his face covered by his arm, blundered to the bottom of the staircase and looked up. The flames had traveled through the first floor and were licking round the balustrades of the landing; the smoke was so thick that he could see nothing but the flames.

"Decima!" he called, "Decima!"

There was no answer, and half blinded and suffocated, he was about to rush up the stairs when they fell away from the landing with a dull crash.

The smoke and dust rendered it impossible for him to see anything for a moment and well-nigh stifled him, but presently he thought he heard a voice above the roar of the fire, and the crackling of the woodwork, and opening his eyes he saw a white figure standing on the landing above him.

"My God!" he said, under his breath, and for a second he was paralyzed by fear—for the first time in his life! It was only for a second, the next he was himself again.

"Decima!" he cried to her, "Decima, can you see—hear me?"

A tongue of flame shot up between them, and they could see each other plainly. He saw her start and hold out her arms to him, heard her cry upon his name, and he held out his arms to her, intending to tell her to jump. He checked the command that sprang to his lips. In the uncertain light, in her terror, she might miss him or jump short, and if she did so she would inevitably injure herself.

"Decima, can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried back to him, and her voice, though quick and trembling, was free from the frenzy of terror. "Go back! Oh, go, go! You cannot save me!"

He laughed fiercely.

"Can I not? I can, and I will, save you! Do not be afraid. Go back. Look! Are the stairs above you safe yet?"

She glanced upward. "Yes; I—I think so! Oh, yes. Pray, pray, go! The fire is all round you! I can see it!"

"Go up to the top room—the one at the back!" he shouted. "Let me see you go! Quick!"

She paused a moment, and looked down at him. Surely, it was not terror on the white face which the flames lit up so plainly, not terror alone, but an indefinable tenderness and joy !

“ Go ! ” he repeated, almost sternly. “ There is not a moment to lose ! I will save you ! Go to the window, but do not break it—the draught— ”

She understood, and with another glance at him sprang up the top stairs.

Gaunt turned and fought his way through the flames and smoke into the open air. Half a dozen men seized him and dragged him away from the house, and beat out the sparks and spots of fire which smouldered in his clothes. His face was black, his hair scorched, and he was almost blinded by the smoke.

“ All right ! ” he said, shaking himself free from the anxious, kindly hands. “ She is safe—as yet. The ladder ? ”

“ It’s here ! ” cried Bright. “ Are you hurt ? ”

“ No ! no ! Take it round to the back—the window with the bars ! Quick ! ” said Gaunt.

He was cool and self-possessed, but his lips trembled.

They tore round to the back with the ladder, and set it up against the house, but the ladder would not quite reach the window.

Gaunt looked up. Some ivy was growing against the side, and he thought he could manage to reach the window.

He sprang to the ladder, but Bright and some of the other men grabbed at him.

“ No, no, you can’t do that, my lord ! Wait, for God’s sake, wait until we’ve tied the smaller ladder on to this one ! ”

“ You can do that when I’m up ! ” said Gaunt, quietly. “ I can reach the window by the ivy. Let me go, please ! ”

He pushed Bright aside and tore off his coat, with his foot on the ladder. Then he ran up. They held the ladder firmly, and gazed up at him with white, scared faces. When he had gained the top rung, he twisted his hands in the ivy as high above his head as possible, and drew himself up. For a moment or two he hung by this frail support, and the crowd, as they stared up at him,

gave a kind of sob and gasp. Then they saw him loosen one hand and reach for the window sill.

"He'll never do it!" exclaimed a voice below. "He'll fall—drop like a stone! Some one get some blankets, something to catch him!"

But Gaunt's strength was Herculean, and it was backed by that cool courage which has made the Englishman master of half of the world. He raised himself inch by inch, got a grip with his other hand, and presently had one knee on the window sill. The crowd sent up a wild cheer; but there was terror and apprehension in it as well as admiration.

Fortunately the sill was one of the wide, old-fashioned ones, and Gaunt found it possible to kneel on it. As he did so, he saw Decima. There was only the glass between their two faces; hers white and strained with terror—for him, not for herself—his black and grimed with smoke.

He smiled at her encouragingly, and spoke her name. Then he gripped one of the bars, and tore it away, and with a cry of warning to those below, flung it down. The second bar came away as easily, but the last held fast. It had been nailed with clamp nails, and resisted all his efforts for a time; and he could not put forth all his strength for fear of losing his balance and falling. Every moment was precious.

He saw a gleam of light behind Decima, and knew that it was the flames which had reached the top story, and would take hold of the room itself presently. Clinging to the side of the window, he exerted all the force he dared, and the bar came away suddenly, so suddenly, that he staggered and swayed; and the spectators beneath groaned and shouted warningly.

"Open the window now!" he said to Decima.

With trembling hands she obeyed, and the next instant he was in the room, and she was in his arms. For a space she hid her face on his breast, and a convulsive sob shook her; then, with her hands clinging to his shoulders, she looked up at him.

"You will be killed! Oh, why have you done it—risked—"

His eyes met hers calmly, with even a smile, but he did

not kiss her, though he held her tightly for this second or two.

"We shall be all right," he said, quietly. "Don't be afraid; do just as I tell you!"

"I am not afraid with you—I am not afraid now!" she panted. "Is it really you? Or am I dead and—and?"—

She gazed up at him with wide-open eyes, and her hands touched him, pressed upon his shoulders, as if she wished to assure herself of the reality of his presence.

"You are not dead—and not going to die, please God!" he said, quietly. "Now, you will do as I tell you. Come to the window—don't look down. Stand there, with your face toward me!"

She obeyed. He sprang to the bed, and tearing off the clothes, tied the sheets and counterpane together into a rope. The end of this he passed under her arms, and knotted securely.

"Oh, what—what are you going to do?" she breathed. He smiled.

"Let you down—into safety," he said.

"Get up on to the window." He lifted her on to the sill. "Now kneel down. Good! Hold my arm. Now shut your eyes and do not open them until you are safe on the ground beneath."

He leaned forward from the window to tell those below what he was about to do; but there was no need: Mr. Bright had guessed at it, and he and another, a strong young fellow, were already on the ladder, waiting to receive her.

"Now, let go your hands," said Gaunt in Decima's ear. "Don't open your eyes, and do not cling to anything. Just let yourself go. Can you do it? Ah, but you can! You will be brave!"

"I will do anything, everything you tell me!" she panted. "But you?"

"Never mind me. I am all right," he said, impatiently. "Are you ready?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him; the look which a woman gives the man she loves, the man who is coolly and calmly risking his life to save hers; the look no pen, however graphic and eloquent, can hope to describe; then

she closed her eyes again, and gradually loosening her hold, folded her arms across her breast.

Gaunt lowered her slowly and gently. Her slight figure swayed to and fro, but he set his feet against the wall and steadied the linen rope, and so lowered her gently until she was grasped by the eager hands outstretched for her.

A wild, enthusiastic cheer rose hoarsely from a hundred throats, the women shrieked with relief and joy; and Gaunt, as he saw her surrounded and darted at by the crowd, smiled and drew a long breath of relief and gratitude.

She was safe!

“Come down! Come down!” rose the shout from every voice. “Quick! The fire!—”

He put his knee on the sill and looked over. As he did so, a tongue of flame shot out from a window beneath him. The fire had reached the back of the house. Decima had been only just in time. She was safe, and the thought, the joy of it, filled Gaunt with a kind of exhilaration. He had conducted and carried through many a forlorn hope, but no success had ever given him such satisfaction as this.

“Come down!” shouted the crowd, and one man in his excitement screamed out an oath.

Gaunt stepped on to the sill, and was about to lower himself, but the flames beneath him curled round the ladder, and he saw that it had caught fire. He hesitated: the crowd groaned and yelled. He saw Decima—her figure in its white dressing-robe, lit up by the flames—break from a group of women and spring to the foot of the ladder. She stood with her face and arms uplifted to him, and he could almost fancy that he saw her lips move. He heard the burning ladder crackle, and hiss as the flames licked it. Then he did the only foolish thing he had done. He left the window and ran to the door of the room. But the fire had obtained a firm hold of the upper landing and no one could hope to pass through it and live. He returned to the window and without any further hesitation lowered himself by the ivy to the ladder and began to descend. But the few seconds—they were scarcely more than five—had permitted the flames to eat through the ladder, and his weight broke it off at the burned part.

He fell, clutching the sides of the ladder, but his weight was too great for the strain, and he came down to the ground with a dull, heavy thud, which smote every soul with horror and pity.

He was conscious for a moment and in that space of time he knew that a white-robed figure was kneeling beside him, that its hands were holding him to its bosom, then all became a blank.

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### CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WEEK later Gaunt was lying on his bed, in his room at the Hall.

It was the room in which his father, his grandfather—and how many generations of Gaunts!—had been born and had died. It was a bright, sunny day, but the blinds were drawn and the nurse and doctor spoke in whispers as they stood by the bed and looked at the scorched and maimed figure lying so still and helplessly on it.

Gaunt opened his eyes, and looked from one to the other. He was very thin and felt as weak as a baby. He tried to move his arm, but with a dull kind of surprise found that he could not do it. Both arms were bound in splints and wadding; he was swathed, so to speak, in cotton wool, and felt and looked like a mummy.

Across his chest, and about his arms was a stinging, aching pain which puzzled him. For a moment he thought he was in Africa and wounded by an assegai, and as he looked at the doctor he said, in the thin tones of extreme weakness—and yet with a smile:

“What’s happened? Have they beaten us?”

The doctor didn’t understand, but he laid a soothing hand on the hot brow.

“Better, I hope, my lord!” he said.

Gaunt tried to nod, but his head was as heavy as lead, and he felt as if even his tongue were burned with the rest of him.

“Have I been ill? Where am I? Ah, yes! Is—is she safe?”

The nurse—she was a woman of the village, who had been through one of the London hospitals, and happening

to be home for a holiday, had begged to be permitted to nurse him—the nurse understood.

"Yes, my lord," she said. "Miss Deane is all right. Quite right!"

Gaunt tried to nod. "Thank God!" he murmured to himself. "Have I been ill long?" he asked.

"It's a week since the fire," said the doctor. "You have not been quite conscious since then."

Gaunt tried to glance at his swollen and imprisoned arms.

"What is the matter with me?"

The doctor knew his man and did not evade the question.

"One arm broken," he said, cheerfully, "and the other burned, in fact, you were scorched and burned pretty liberally."

"The fire? Ah, yes—I remember!" said Gaunt. "It was a bad fire. Any lives lost? Miss Deane—is not hurt, ill?"

"Miss Deane is all right, thanks to you," said the doctor, with a slight catch in his voice. "No; there were no lives lost. Mr. Deane nearly came to grief. He was anxious to rescue some invention, some model or other, and ran into the house after it; but the men dragged him out and he was not burned."

Gaunt nodded.

"I'm glad. How—how did it occur?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Something caught fire and exploded. Some preparation of Mr. Deane's, I believe," ironically, "that it was the compound which he was inventing for the extinction of fire."

Gaunt smiled.

"And they're all safe? The servants and all?"

"Yes; quite safe. You are the only one who has suffered."

"That's all right," said Gaunt, with quiet satisfaction. "I fell from the ladder, I suppose? I remember now. I'm rather thirsty."

The nurse gave him some water.

"Thanks. The house—the Woodbines—must be rebuilt. I should like it to be rebnilt as soon as possible, and as much like the old one—"

"Plenty of time for that, my lord," said the doctor. "We must not let you worry yourself about that or anything else at present. Are you in any pain?"

"Nothing to speak of," said Gaunt, though the aching of the burned muscles made him catch his breath even as he spoke. "I suppose I shall pull through?" he asked, quietly.

The doctor smiled, but it was an uncertain and painfully professional smile.

"I hope so, my lord," he said.

Gaunt looked at him calmly but searchingly.

"There's a doubt, eh?" he said. "Well, I am sure you will do your best, doctor."

He was silent for a minute or so; then he said, with an affectation of indifference:

"I've been unconscious, haven't I?"

"This is the first time you have been really conscious," said the doctor.

"Yes? I—I fancied—you know one fancies things when one is off one's head?—that there was some one else here besides you two. Thank you, nurse, that's more comfortable!"

The nurse had raised the pillows slightly. The nurse and the doctor exchanged glances, and it was she who answered.

"It wasn't fancy only, my lord. Miss Deane has been to see you; in fact—" She hesitated, but Gaunt's eyes were fixed on her and she went on. "Well, she did say that we were not to tell you, my lord, but Miss Deane has been here all the time, helping to nurse you."

A slight flush rose to the white face.

"I thought so," he said, quietly. "Any one else been here?"

"Mr. Bright and Mr. Robert, Miss Deane's brother," said the nurse. "He came down from Sandhurst. He's down-stairs now."

"Is he?" said Gaunt. "I should like to see him!"

"Not just at present. Later in the day, after you have had some sleep," said the doctor, decisively.

Gaunt nodded and closed his eyes.

"Very well," he said; "I'm under orders, and must obey."

He slept or seemed to sleep for about an hour, then he opened his eyes.

"Ask Mr. Robert to come up," he said to the nurse, and Bobby entered the room.

"Ah, Bobby, how are you?" said Gaunt. "Sorry I can't shake hands! How is your sister?"

Bobby bent over the white wasted face, with its scorched hair and too brilliant eyes.

"Decima's all right," he said. "She—she's down-stairs."

There was a suspicious moisture in Bobby's bright eyes.

"I—she—I want to thank you, Lord Gaunt!" he stammered, but Gaunt cut him short.

"That's all right, Bobby! All's well that ends well. She's safe—and not hurt, they tell me. And that's the principal thing. We'll build up the house again." A spasm of agony silenced him for a moment, but still he smiled. "And—and—we must persuade your father to drop the fire-extinguishing business. And how do you like Sandhurst? Tell me all about it."

But Bobby could not talk of himself or Sandhurst.

"You saved her life!" he said, brokenly.

"Why not?" asked Gaunt, with a quiet smile. "Wouldn't you have done the same? Very well, then! How well you are looking! Nice place, Sandhurst! We shall see you a colonel, commanding one of her majesty's regiments presently, Bobby!" His voice broke, for another spasm of pain had caught hold of him. "I—I want to send a message to your sister. Tell her—Are you listening? I want you to remember the exact words, please! Tell her that I'm not in the least pain! Don't forget!"

Bobby nodded, and went away; he could not have spoken to save his life.

The doctor came up to the bedside, and Gaunt smiled up at him.

"Am I going to die, doctor?" he asked, coolly. "There's a funny feeling about my heart."

The doctor grew grave, and bent his ear to Gaunt's breast.

"It's the shock," he said under his breath. "You were very badly burned, Lord Gaunt."

"I know," said Gaunt. "I—asked you because if you

think there's a chance of joining the majority, I—I—well, I should like to see Miss Deane."

The doctor was silent for a moment, then he said :

"I will tell her, my lord."

"Thanks," said Gaunt, cheerfully.

He lay quite still after the doctor had left the room, and the nurse, watching him, thought he had gone to sleep, but when the door opened Gaunt opened his eyes and a faint flush rose to his white face, for Decima had entered with the doctor. As she came to the side of the bed Gaunt said :

"Will you two clear out for a few minutes?"

They went out, and Decima was alone with him.

She knelt beside the bed and looked at him. The light was waning, and he could not see the expression on her face, in her eyes ; but her sweet presence thrilled through him.

"I—I wanted to see you, to thank you!" he said, in a low voice.

She raised her eyes.

"To—to thank me—me?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said, in a thin voice, which for all its feebleness had nothing morbid in it. "They have told me that you have helped to nurse me. That is so, isn't it? It was like you, Decima. You see I call you—Decima! You—you will not be offended—angry?"

She looked at him in speechless sorrow and anguish.

"I—I wanted to see you, to bid you—well, to wish you 'Good-by.' I'm afraid our friend, the doctor, doesn't think any great things of me."

She hid her face in the coverlet for a moment, but raised it again and looked at him.

"And I wanted to ask you—to hear—Decima, do you think you can—that you can forgive me?"

She fought for calmness—prayed for it. She had been warned that she must not excite him.

"Forgive! You ask me that! You—who—have saved my life! Who may be dying?"

"That's nothing" he said, quietly. "Any fireman at thirty shillings a week, would have done all I did, and less clumsily. That's—that's nonsense." The pain caught hold of him and silenced him for a moment, then

he went on. "I—I meant for what—what I said to you that night—for what I asked you to do, Decima!"

"Yes; I—I forgive!" she said.

"Thank you, dearest! You see, I take advantage of my situation! But—ah, Decima, you are 'dearest' to me. I love—but I didn't mean to speak of that. Decima, I have heard of your engagement."

She started slightly, but said nothing.

"I've heard of young Illminster. I knew his uncle. A good sort. I—hope he'll make you a good husband, Decima! He's—he's a lucky young fellow! I—I should like to see him; but I don't suppose they'd let me. As if it mattered! And—and—Decima, I've made a little will." He smiled. "Don't be afraid. I've not left you anything worth speaking of. I know you'd only refuse it. No; only a trifle. Some pearls and things. You'll wear the diamonds on your wedding day. Promise, Decima!"

She was silent for a moment; then she said, almost inaudibly:

"I promise."

"Thanks! They—they were my mother's. This—this is rather a mournful business, and—and it may be absurd and grotesque, too, for I may pull through, after all, though I fancy not, for the doctor smiled, and when they smile—I've just seen Bobby. I've left him my guns and some other things. How dark it is getting, Decima! I can say this now, because—well, because you are going to marry young Illminster, and be happy. Yes, be happy, dearest! That has always been my wish; just that you should be happy! God knows I have not helped you to happiness! My love hitherto has only made you wretched. God forgive me! But how I have loved you!"

He drew a long breath and looked at her as if he were trying to impress her every feature upon his memory that he might carry it with him—wherever he was going.

"How I have loved you! Life is short—let one be as happy as one may—life is short. Soon—and yet not for a long time, I hope, dearest—you will cross the river that divides life from death, and we shall meet. We shall meet face to face, with hearts bare to each other's gaze, and there you will know how I have loved you!"

He looked at her with a brave smile, but Decima could not see it for tears.

She bent over him.

"You—you are wrong!" she breathed, scarcely knowing what she said. "Lord Illminster—he—I—I am not going to marry him. I am—not going to marry any one—"

She wiped the tears from her eyes hastily, for they obscured her sight, and his face was precious to her!

"Not going to marry! Why not?" he asked, in his thin voice. "Not marry Illminster? They told me—why not?"

"Because—because"—Her voice broke and her head bent lower; "because I do not love him. I—I love some one else."

Her head sank until her face was hidden upon his arm.

His eyes grew wider and he frowned.

"Who is this some one else, Decima?" he said, slowly, for his pain had gotten hold upon him again.

"Can't—can't—you tell?" she whispered. "Oh, my dearest"—She cast aside her trembling shyness, and bent over him, love pouring from her eyes, vibrating in her voice. "Oh, don't you know? Did you think that I should cease to love you? Did you think that I should change—alter? You know that I loved you; do you think that I should not love you now—now that you have risked your life for me?"

"Decima!" he breathed, wondering, scarcely daring to think that he was awake and not dreaming.

"Yes, I love you," she breathed. "I have loved you all through—it was wicked, I know, but I cannot help it! There is no one else! There could not be! You must not die! Ah, you must not or I must die, too! I could not live without you, dearest! I could not, because I love you better than life itself."

A light shone in Gaunt's eyes; his lips trembled. He tried to move; but he could not: he was bound and swathed too scientifically, securely.

"I can't move!" he exclaimed. "I can't put my arm round you! Oh, my love—my love!"

Blushing over face and neck, she put her arms round him and pressed him to her bosom, and bent lower and

lower, until her lips touched his, and when they had thus touched, they clung with a kiss in which even her great love found expression.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her arms were still round him when the doctor came into the room, and she looked round with a strange look in her lovely eyes. It was the look which the lioness wears when she is protecting her cub, the mother when she holds her best-loved against her bosom and so dares death itself ! ”

The doctor looked at her and then at Gaunt.

“ Has he fainted ? ” he asked, in a grave whisper.

Decima held the dear head still closer—yet, how gently ! —to her bosom.

“ You—you had better go, my dear young lady,” said the doctor, gravely.

But Gaunt opened his eyes.

“ Let her stay, doctor ! ” he said, with a smile. “ I’m not going to die. Men don’t die when they have so much to live for, and I—well, I’m going to live ! ”

And he did. Much to the surprise of the doctors, Gaunt “ turned the corner ” that day, soon became convalescent, and regained his health and all his old strength with remarkable rapidity.

As Lady Roborough remarked :

“ The Gaunts always did the unexpected,” and she added, to Decima, that this particular member of the family was the most obstinate of men. “ If he has made up his mind to live, and make you happy, you may depend upon it he will do so.”

He displayed his obstinacy not only in getting well, but in the matter of an early marriage. Decima pleaded “ for time,” of course ; but Gaunt would scarcely listen to the plea, and she was so grateful to him for not dying that she yielded.

They were married within the month, and for a time, for nearly a year, in fact, disappeared from the sight, though not the memory, of their friends and wandered about the Continent, far off the beaten tracks, staying at some little old-world town, or lingering beside one of the smaller Italian lakes whose shores the tourist has not yet troubled with his check suit and camera.

They ought to have been bored to death, but, strange to say, they were not. Their love had been tried in a very fiery furnace, and had stood a test even more severe than a prolonged honeymoon, and it was not because they were tired of wandering, or of each other, that at last one day, early in summer, they turned homeward.

That Leafmore was glad to see them goes without saying, and the people showed their delight at the return of "my lord and lady" in the usual way. There were triumphal arches and a brass band, and the whole village turned out to meet and greet them, and escorted them to the Hall, with cheers which drowned the music of the band. To those who know the power and volume of a country brass band this will convey a fairly accurate idea of the heartiness of the cheers.

Having reached home, Gaunt and Decima would have liked to settle down into a life as closely resembling their quiet honeymoon as possible, but Decima was too wise to yield to the desire.

"Yes," she said, stifling a sigh, as she regarded the little heap of invitations which very soon appeared beside the breakfast plate. "We must go, of course. I must not forget that you do not belong to me altogether."

"Oh, indeed!" he said. "And to whom also do I belong, pray?"

"To these, and these, and these," she said, turning over the notes from the Roboroughs and the Ferndales and the rest. "We must do our duty, dearest. Besides"—she hesitated, and looked at him wistfully.

"Out with it," he said, with a smile. "I was thinking what a nice, quiet time we would have down here, you and I; but if you've got an idea that it's your Duty—Duty with a capital D—to drag me into a round of dinner parties, I'm quite certain that you'll do it. But go on. What were you going to remark?"

"I was going to say that I didn't want you to get tired of me—of living a sort of *Darby and Joan* existence."

Gaunt laughed, with an affectation of mockery.

"My dear Decima, that's a little too thin! As if I didn't know that you are dying to gad about among these people, and be petted and made much of—as if there were

any special merit in being pretty to look at and having 'mousy' ways which get over people."

She rose and put her arms round his neck and her finger on his lips.

"You'll have the servants come in and see you!" he said pretending to be alarmed.

"And if they do?" she retorted. "They all know I'm weak enough to be in love with you still."

They did the round of dinner parties, and as Gaunt had prophesied, Decima was petted and made much of. In due course they returned the hospitality extended to them, and dinners and dances, garden parties and impromptu luncheons for a time "rule firm" at Leafmore.

It was after one of these quiet lunches, which was eaten in the dining-room and on the terrace indifferently, that Decima, who was seated on the lawn beside Lady Roborough and Aunt Pauline—that lady had long ago forgiven Gaunt, and had grown absurdly attached to him—saw a fly coming up the drive.

"Who are these, dear?" asked Lady Roborough. "More visitors? If so, it is to be hoped there is some luncheon left."

"I don't know whom it can be," said Decima, looking at the middle-aged and rather nervous-looking lady and the very pretty little girl who sat beside her in the carriage.

At this moment Gaunt, followed by Lord Ferndale and the other gentlemen, came down the terrace and joined the ladies.

"There is some one coming—who is it?" said Decima.

Before she could finish the girl in the carriage caught sight of Gaunt, jumped up, called to the driver to stop, and, getting out, ran quickly across the lawn and seized Gaunt's hand with a cry of innocent delight.

Gaunt looked down at her for an instant or two, in doubt and uncertainty, then he, too, cried out, and as delightedly:

"Why, Maude! Is it possible?"

"Yes!" she responded, clinging to his hand and nodding at him, and then back at her mother, who was following her more slowly and timidly. "And you are glad to see me? You don't mind my coming, do you?"

"Glad! I should think so!" said Gaunt. "How do you do, Mrs. Watson?" he added, extending his hand to her mother.

"There! I said so!" exclaimed Maude. "Mamma said we ought not to come; that we ought to wait—that it wasn't good manners; but I knew you wouldn't mind—that you'd be glad to see me. And—oh, I did so want to see you!"

Gaunt, all aglow with pleasure, turned to Decima and the others.

"This is Mrs. Watson and little Maude, my fellow passengers on the poor Pevensey Castle, Decie——"

But Decima had guessed their identity before this, and had given an eager hand to the rather embarrassed lady.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you! So very glad!" said Decima, with "the Decima voice and smile," as Lady Roborough called it. "Oh, let her come to me, Edward!" she said, wistfully, and she drew the child to her eagerly.

"I ought to apologize for this—this intrusion," said Mrs. Watson, nervously; "but—but we are in England on a visit, and Maude insisted upon coming."

"And you very properly and kindly yielded," said Gaunt, gratefully. "It was very kind of you, and if I tried I couldn't tell you how glad I and my wife—this is my wife, Mrs. Watson—are to see you!"

"I said so, mother!" said Maude, nodding triumphantly.

"How well she looks!" said Gaunt, a few minutes later, and speaking in an undertone, so that Maude, who was the center of a group of ladies, to whom she was trying to talk all at once, might not hear. Her mother's face flushed with gratitude and happiness.

"Yes, she is quite well! It was Africa. Oh, it is a wonderful country, and—and I can never be too thankful! She is all the world to me, Lord Gaunt. But if it had not been for you, we should never have reached Africa, and Maude——"

"Mamma's trying to thank him," said Maude at that moment. "As if she could! Besides, he doesn't like being thanked—I know that!"

"Come, Maude," said Mrs. Watson. "We will go now. Lady Gaunt——"

"Indeed, you will not!" said Decima, with gentle stern-

ness. "You are not going for a long time—oh, a very long time. You are going to stay with us, are you not, Maude?"

Maude looked from Gaunt to Decima, then nodded and smiled ecstatically.

"Oh, yes—yes! Please, mamma!" she said, beseechingly, and Gaunt rendered any discussion futile by sending for their luggage.

A little later, when the other guests had gone, with the exception of Lady Roborough, who was staying in the house. Decima and she were sitting at tea with Mrs. Watson, on the terrace, Maude was on Gaunt's knee, and Mrs. Watson was telling the other two ladies of the child's marvelous recovery.

"And how well you look—how well and strong!" Maude was saying to Gaunt. "We read all about the fire, and what you did, and mamma said she was afraid you'd die; but I said, no: that you were too strong. Do you remember how you used to lift me, chair and all, just as if I were a baby—like your dear little one in the nursery upstairs?"

"You're a very big baby now, Maude," remarked Gaunt.

"Yes, am I not? And I'm so strong, too! Oh, do you think I ought to have any more cake? Well, just this piece. What a pretty lady Lady Gaunt is!" she said, after a quiet munch.

"Yes, I think so, too. I'm glad you agree with me."

"And how—how happy, how very happy she looks!" remarked Maude, contemplating Decima thoughtfully.

"Yes, I think she's fairly happy, Maude," he assented. "I don't beat her very often. Yes, I fancy she's happy!"

"I know why!" said the child, with a quiet laugh.

Lady Roborough heard her and looked round

"Because she hath 'her heart's desire,'" she quoted to Gaunt.

Maude looked from one to the other, rather puzzled for a moment or so. Then she smiled up at Gaunt triumphantly, as if she had guessed the riddle.

"She means you!" she said, shrewdly.





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